



アリス!!

成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

イラスト:ヤスダスズヒト
Illustration : Suzuhito Yasuda

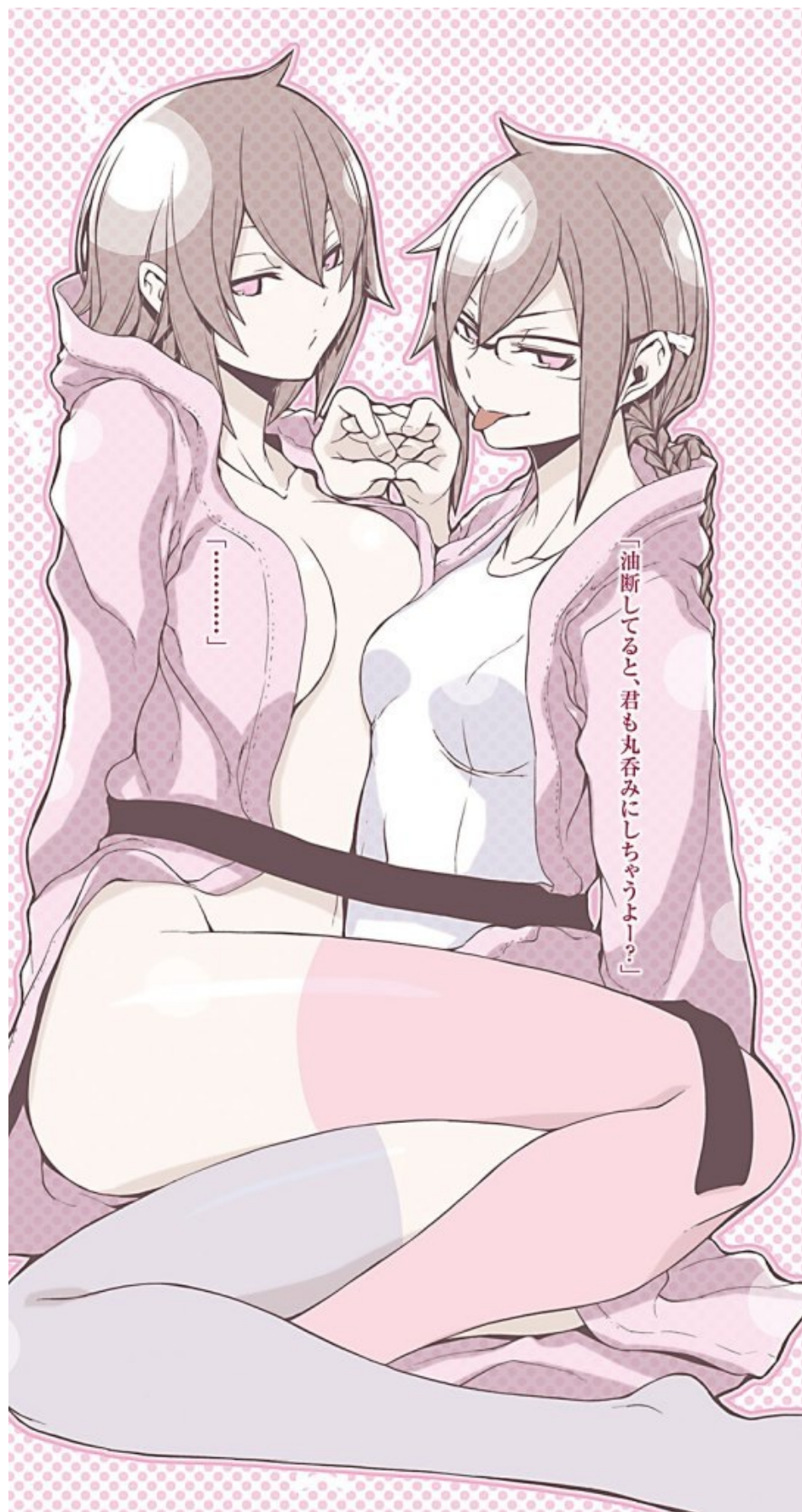


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Prelude

Snakes' Legs (*Da'Soku*)

'Etymology: A story in the Strategies of Qi in the Zhan Guo Ce (Strategies of the Warring States). In the olden Chinese state of Chu, in a competition to paint a snake in the shortest time, the painter first to finish went so far as to paint legs, resulting in his loss.' Excess. A useless addition.

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This is a story of excess.

The Headless Rider. A colourless colour gang. A demon sword slashing humans to feed its love for humans.

The scars left on Ikebukuro by monsters of the supernatural.

As people imagined these monsters, fantasised about them, and were at times even infatuated by them – word of them continued on as urban legend.

The addition of the forelegs of a snake to this completed painting.

Perhaps pointless stories and people will be called forth.

The unnecessary additions to this humongous serpent grown from urban legends.

But even so, we cannot forget.

That if the forelegs of the serpent were to evolve into arms, and if it were to have 'hands' that were to take hold of everything –

Sometimes snakes can become dragons.



Prologue A

The Ruffians

“Damned monster.”

There was a boy who had, until graduation from middle school, been called this countless times.

There was a hot spring village nestled in the mountains of Akita, far from human society.

As a well-hidden hot spring it was popular and received visitors throughout the year, but in the face of a declining population, it was a shrinking community.

The boy was born in this village perhaps fifteen years ago.

‘Perhaps’—for this information was uncertain.

As an infant, umbilical cord freshly cut, he had been wrapped in cloth and abandoned at the entrance of a certain hot spring inn.

Thereafter, taken in by the old woman who owned the inn, this infant was adopted by the owner’s daughter and her husband; and blessed with the same degree of love as any other child, and an environment twice as wealthy, grew quickly.

Yet, before he was fully grown emotion- and thoughtwise, there was external interference.

It was a commonplace situation: there appeared ones who were jealous of this boy, that despite the lack of blood relation was raised by these powerful figures of the village; and they sought to hurt him both mentally and physically. But as a result, the village came to know of the abnormalcy of this boy.

When the boy had just entered elementary school, his seniors picked a fight with him.

All five who approached him to cause trouble were older than him and large-sized, infamous ruffians in the neighbourhood.

Back then he had not yet known he was adopted, and not understanding what they were saying of him, he had merely tilted his head in confusion.

But perhaps angry that he made no reply, the seniors began to get violent.

The senior punched the new student and grabbed his collar as he staggered; anyone would have guessed it would turn out as a one-sided bullying incident.

In truth, it did indeed end up a one-sided fight.

But the winner was opposite to what anyone had expected.

That was the first time he displayed his ‘ability’.

It was not that he had trained specially before attending elementary school.

It was not that he had a body of steel, and there was no way he could have any kind of monstrous, vending machine-lifting strength.

All he had was one thing that could even be called a ‘sense’.

The same way some carnivores can, by instinct alone, sense the whereabouts of their prey.

The very instant after his collar was grabbed by the senior, the boy retaliated.

He grabbed the senior's ear, and wrenched it downward.

The senior, sensing instinctually that his ear was being torn off, let go of the boy's collar and shrunk on himself unthinkingly—only to be headbutted in the bridge of his nose by the six-year-old boy.

Of course, it was not a conscious decision.

The boy had simply intended to attack his opponent as quickly as possible with a hard part of his body.

Although it was, indeed, odd for a child who had just entered elementary school to think such things.

And the young boy had no concept of 'mercy' or 'holding back'.

And if one were to give an example of a personality trait of this boy—

'Cowardice'.

It could probably be summarised by this word alone.

The boy was a coward, and so detested fear.

That was all there was to it.

He had twice the average sensitivity to fear, and detested it twice as much as others.

As a result it could be said that by the combination of this cowardice and his 'ability', a 'monster' was born.

The senior who had spoken incomprehensible things and attacked him had qualified as an object of his fear.

He had to push the fear away from himself.

He had to remove the fear from before his eyes.

Following his instincts, the boy continued to kick the crouching senior.

Unmistakeably targeting his face.

Using the tip of his foot, crushing even the senior's fingers covering his face.

Even as he saw blood drip to the floor from between those fingers, there was no hesitation.

Again, and again

unstoppingly.

With that incident as a starting point, the boy became feared by all around him.

As it was the senior who first attacked him, and also by the fact that he was the son of a powerful family in the village, they were able to prevent the incident from escalating—but the boy's life was twisted.

Though in a sense there was no twist at all; for perhaps it could be said that he was simply obeying his instincts, walking forward on a straight path.

Despite the declining population of the village, other than the senior who the boy had severely injured, there were many problematic children.

There were older boys who intended to teach this brazen child a lesson, under the name of avenging their friend. With even middle schoolers in the mix, if he were to be ganged up on by such a group, he would most certainly be powerless.

Or so one would be led to think, but—

When the new student was punched by the first attacker, and straddled on the ground, in that instant—without hesitation, he thrust his fingers into his opponent's eye.

Although the eye itself was not gouged out, at the sight of their friend screaming with blood dripping out his eye, for a

moment, the seniors gulped in fear.

Their friend was yelling and sprawled on the ground; and it was a boy no more than six years old who picked up a nearby stone and made as to continue his attack.

At this horrendous scene, they thought one thing in unison:

That what was before them was something different from themselves.

It was a child more than one head shorter than themselves, who had not even hit puberty.

In spite of that, it felt as if they were facing a wolf or a bear of that size.

If they were to recollect themselves and attack the child in a group there would be a significant chance of success.

However, bousouzoku or gangs, both used to fighting in groups, would be one thing; asking this of elementary and middle school students who were only acting tough was too much.

The first one to attack him next met with the same fate.

As they saw their friend having his teeth knocked out and broken with a stone, their legs were frozen.

As would be expected it was eventually regarded as a case of excessive self-defence, but as he was only six years old, after police involvement he was sent to the juvenile counselling centre.

After that no one else in the village attacked him, but when he reached the age where one would consider whether they could make it to middle school—people from the surrounding regions who had heard the rumours from the village's delinquents appeared, and began to pick fights with him.

The reason was exceedingly simple.

The seniors from back then had grown up, and the area they moved within had expanded; while they had fights as well, they built new friendships—and in that process, by impulse, they mentioned the name of the boy who had tried to kill them in the past.

Their memory of their past trauma embellished in their minds, rumours of the boy spread as such: 'At six years old he tore someone's ear off, was completely unafraid even against ten people, and broke a whole set of ribs with a stone—a prodigiously strong child.'

And the delinquents from these foreign regions, who had picked a fight half out of curiosity, came to realise.

That just as the exaggerated rumours would imply, the boy had grown up, ominously enough.

'Fucking monster.'

Those were the words said by one who had been injured half to death by the boy, who had just entered middle school.

—Fucking monster.

—Monster.

—He's a monster.

To avenge their friends.

On occasion, to display their strength to those around them, to become part of legend.

Ruffians, each confident in their own strength, arrived one after another from the surrounding regions.

The boy met all of them with his own attacks.

The boy was only ever afraid.

Despite his intention to live honestly there was an irrational amount of enmity directed towards himself; this, above all,

was terrifying.

The boy began to train his body.

To protect himself from the incomprehensible terrors that came down on him.

Even in this period the rumours continued to spread, to the point where even challengers from other prefectures appeared.

The days filled with fighting. The training to repel that terror.

With that, 'experience' and 'diligence' were built on his natural 'ability'.

Nothing made sense.

He never made any provocation, but yet others picked fights with him; and on top of that each day the ones who did so feared him and called him, over and over, a monster.

In the third year of middle school, when the boy turned fifteen, he gave up on everything.

And as an orphan, by this age he had already come to understand.

While he felt gratitude to the parents that had raised him, he no longer looked forward to anything the world could offer.

All he could do was most likely to continue living this worthless life, labelled as a monster.

After all, when it came down to it, that was how the world was; how life was.

To the point where he was made to believe this at only fifteen—the world had indeed treated him callously.

It was not that he had been made to suffer more than he should.

Despite all of the assault cases he incurred his family had never abandoned him, and the police, in light of the fact that the boys who attacked him wielded knives and metal pipes, judged his behaviour as rightful self-defence, and managed to spare him from having to enter a boys' home.

But still eyes that looked upon him only held an unreasonable amount of hatred and fear.

The kindness of his family only made the boy lonelier.

He could only feel that he, who was so called a monster, was impinging on this family of decent people.

In this situation that seemed no more than being dead alive, the boy stopped holding on to hope, and without even despairing, continued to live a life where he could feel no meaning.

Thinking all along that this could continue for the remainder of his life.

At this juncture, the boy met a turning point.

On a day nearing the end of summer, a tourist from Tokyo came to the village.

On the way back from watching the Oomagari Fireworks Festival, he had come to visit the remote hot spring village of the rumours.

The guest, staying at the number one hot spring inn in the village, happened to witness a fight between the boy and some delinquents.

The guest gazed curiously at the horrible fight, and immediately after, smiled as he said to the boy:

"It's nice for kids to have so much energy."

The boy's face was shocked.

Until then his fights had been witnessed by tourists numerous times, but all of them had watched with fear-filled eyes; none had smiled so happily.

To the boy who stood in the centre of the fallen, bloody delinquents, the traveller continued.

"It's good to follow your human instincts while you have the energy to spare."

To this man, who seemed to have no trace of morals, the boy spoke.

What did he mean by human instincts? Did he think he was a monster?

And then the tourist replied.

"? You're asking strange things. If you're not human what would you call yourself?"

With a gentle smile, the man continued to speak.

"It's true you seem to be good at fighting, but doesn't that just make you a human who can fight well...? There are people more inhuman than you in the world, and even supernatural creatures exist, after all."

The boy was shocked at the tourist who spoke these strange things.

But he did not appear to be lying.

The boy felt himself a strong waver at being called 'human' in his current situation.

What exactly had this tourist seen before?

As the tourist stood to leave, unthinkingly, the boy asked.

He asked where the tourist had come to this village from.

And the tourist, with a bright smile, replied.

'Ikebukuro.'

The boy had heard of this place.

It was one of the famous cities in Tokyo, but to the boy, who had hardly left his village, it was a feat to even know just the name.

Interested, the boy, with the web function on his barely-used smartphone, began to research 'Ikebukuro'.

The sharply-taken videos of the supernatural creature known as the Headless Rider and the man who threw vending machines.

Time passed as the boy grasped at this information.

He swallowed, and as if obsessed, continued to fish for 'information'.

The Headless Rider.

The mysterious bartender.

The Slasher.

Keywords reminiscent of a manga surfaced and vanished from the screen.

He felt his heart pounding, loudly.

At a time where he had accepted the loneliness of thinking, 'After all, I'm a monster,'—a new world had opened up to him.

The boy, who had spent his days fighting in and out, through the small screen of the smartphone, saw the world.

There was certainly 'fear' there as well.

The 'cowardice' that had rendered the boy a monster had eased to a certain extent as he grew, but even so, it had not

disappeared.

The Headless Rider was scary.

The man who threw vending machines was scary.

The Slasher was scary.

Hundreds-strong gangs were, inevitably, scary.

But that impact forced his heart onward.

His curiosity surpassed his fear.

In a normal situation, this was where he would feel the need to put distance between the terrifying Headless Rider and himself.

He should have thought to avoid Ikebukuro at all costs.

But he realised his own true desire.

—To live and die as a monster, like this—

—The loneliness of giving up on the world and dying like that is the scariest thing of all.

Eventually, the information from that tiny screen grew insufficient—

And so when the time came where he had to decide his future, to the parents who had raised him, he made a selfish request.

Although he had only ever taken up fights from those who provoked him first, it was a fact that his fights had troubled the family greatly.

There had also been times involving the police where delinquents, in their resentment, had set fire to the hot spring inn.

Perhaps it was his guilt from those issues, or perhaps it was his gratitude towards his family for never having abandoned him in spite of that; up till then the boy had never made a single selfish request of his parents.

Maybe because he had given up on the world, as opposed to his life that was inundated with fighting, he took a completely serious attitude towards life, and had never demanded anything from his parents or grandmother.

And this boy, for the first time since he fought in elementary school—made a request for the first time.

I want to enter a school in Tokyo—in Ikebukuro.

His parents hesitated at this sudden request.

But to the boy who said, passionately, that he wanted to learn more, his grandmother, the owner of the hot spring, spoke.

“Come, sit.”

Staring at the boy, who did as told, his grandmother continued, quietly.

“You’re a timid child, but... You’ve grown while we weren’t looking, haven’t you?”

His grandmother spoke in the village’s unique variant of the Akita dialect, and smiled at the boy.

In the end, afterwards, with his grandmother’s final say, the boy’s request was accepted.

And so the boy who was called a monster came to Ikebukuro.

To face the world he had given up on once more.

To meet the true ‘monsters’ he knew not of yet.

The boy's name was Mizuchi Yahiro.
What he would see from now on remained unknown.
Who would the cowardly monster meet in the city of Ikebukuro?
And what would he accomplish, or not?
No one knew this, but the only certain thing was that—
The city itself would not reject any kind of person that came.

One and a half years past the end of the Dollars:
Ikebukuro now welcomes a new wind.

Prologue B

The Eccentric

A city, so long as people reside in it, changes often.

Ikebukuro was no exception, and being a place where many gathered, the atmosphere of the city was subject to minute shifts due to trends and occasionally economic or societal changes.

But the city and its people are, after all, one heart and body.

Just as how people change the city, people are, in turn, changed by the city.

Whether that change is growth or decay, or something entirely different – in the end, the result of that change varies between individuals.

“We’re full-fledged third-years already; Kuru-nee, have you thought of your career?”

Walking on a main road leading from Ikebukuro Station to Sunshine, dubbed ‘60-Storey Street’, a girl spoke to the person walking next to her, who wore a similar face.

“...Yes...”

With a voice no louder than a mosquito’s, the other girl replied to her younger sister who walked alongside her.

“Wow~. Kuru-nee, you’re so serious~. I was thinking if I should just be a NEET. Kuru-nee, go out and work and feed me~”

Bothersome

“...No...”

They were twins, but aside from their faces there was no resemblance at all

The younger Orihara Mairu had spectacles and long hair in braids, and was dressed like a quiet top student, but had a lively, active personality and was one to put action before words.

And the older Orihara Kururi, despite her boyish looks, had no energy in her eyes or her voice, and hovered with the air of an old doll.

This fashion was neither natural nor acquired.

Since they were children they had, whimsically, decided to have opposite personalities and interests. ‘Twins are a symbol of perfection; each twin can supplement the other’s shortcomings.’ With this in mind, to make up for one another’s faults, they had, at a young age, decided their fates by drawing lots

To decide who would live how.

And deciding that if either were to face trouble, the other would, unquestionably, come to her aid.

It might have been nothing more than a childish fantasy, but it was how they had grown to be.

The few commonalities of interest were that they were both fans of the young male idol Hanehima Yuuhei, and that they loved one another.

The twins’ eccentric presence was to some extent well-known in the city.

They were aimlessly, contentedly savouring the last dregs of their spring break of an Ikebukuro high school, Raira Academy.

“But we’re third-years already, huh~. Time flies~. Just a while ago it felt like we were just first-years, and now we’re

already third-years, imagine. It felt like just three months.”

Time flies

“...time...”

“But the city changed in some ways too, hm~. Karisawa-san and her gang were in uproar when the Animate and Toranoana stores opened or moved, too. Looks like other new stores are coming up everywhere, too.”

Mairu shook her head as she said this, her braids swinging as she looked around the street.

“Ah, but there are things that haven’t changed. Like Cinema Sunshine over there, or the game centre...”

Mairu stopped there. She had spotted the face of an acquaintance at the entrance to the game centre linked to the cinema.

“Oh, look, Kuru-nee, it’s Aocchi. He’s with Yoshikiri-kun and gang, too.” Kururi looked to where Mairu was looking, and saw the figure of their male schoolmate – Kuronuma Aoba. Being a holiday the boy was naturally dressed in casual, and he gave off an air unlike the one in school. “Aocchi’s a third year too, huh~. He was kiddish when we first met, but he’s grown a bit taller since then~.” Mairu, speaking thoughtfully, sidled towards the group of boys. And without hesitation performed a chop on Aoba’s head.

“Ow — ”

“Yahoo! Aocchi, doing fine? You still alive?”

“Oh, Mairu. ...what was that greeting for?”

Aoba sighed in resignation, and Mairu grinned as she replied.

“Cause see, Aocchi, we haven’t seen you for so long, so~ it was like you went off to do something dangerous and died.”

“Don’t say that so carelessly...”

Pinching Aoba’s cheek, Mairu continued.

“But you really are doing dangerous things, right? Just a while ago you clashed with Dragon Zombie again, right?”

“...Your ears are sharp, as usual.”

Kuronuma Aoba was a core figure in the delinquent group known as the Blue Square.

They used to don blue bandanas and balaclavas and operate as a colour gang, but had now cut down on the emphasis on colour, and made effort to be inconspicuous on the surface.

To the boy who on first sight did not look delinquent in the slightest, Mairu spoke, innocuously:

“But even like this we’re already out of touch, you know? Since Iza-nii disappeared and Namie-san went to America, it’s only the seniors at Rakuei gym who tell us these things.”

“Either way, it’s nothing related to you Oriharas.”

Aoba shrugged as he said this, but then Kururi leaned her face by his ear.

You can’t go off on your own and die

“...no ...on your own...die...”

“Whoa?!”

At the sudden whisper by his ear, Aoba yelped unthinkingly.

Kururi thudded her forehead onto his shoulder, and smiled slightly.

“~~~”

After some gaping, Aoba’s face went red, and:

“Don’t threaten me,” he said, and averted his face.

But before he did so he met the eyes of one of his gang, and startled.

Because the person in question was glaring hatefully at Aoba, cheek twitching.

"Y, Yoshikiri?"

"You bastard... acting all lovey-dovey with a cute girl in broad daylight... With! A cute girl!"

The boy more than one head taller held Aoba by the throat.

"I'll kill you! If I kill you at least some man in the world will get that share of girls surely!"

"Even so it wouldn't be you Yoshikiri... Ugogogogoh all right! I give! I give!"

Seeing Aoba turning purple, the other boys snickered as well.

Just as the shade of his face began to turn to something definitely not a laughing matter, a boy looked out from a corner of the game centre, and cried in shock:

"Wait, Yoshikiri-san, what're you doing to Kuronuma-senpai?!"

Prying the boy called Yoshikiri off of Aoba was a boy relatively young compared to the rest of Aoba's gang.

"Let go Kotonami! If I kill him I'll get girls too!"

"But there's no way you'll get girls Yoshikiri-san!"

"...Aah?"

"Ah..."

There was a crick as Yoshikiri's temple twitched, and he let go of Aoba's neck.

This time he reached for the younger boy, and locked all of his joints in a cobra twist.

"Popular guys don't care for their lives after all, huh? Huh?!"

"Gyaa! I give up! I give up!"

A few minutes later, after Yoshikiri had attracted the attention of the game centre's staff, the boy was eventually released, and rubbing his whole body, he asked Aoba:

"Kuronuma-senpai, are these pretty twin onee-san your girlfriends?"

"No!"

Yoshikiri interrupted instantaneously, but ignoring him, Aoba replied.

"No... Not my girlfriends, they're my friends, just friends."

He answered bluntly, but in that moment Mairu smirked and interrupted.

"Yep. We're friends, just friends. Cause both Kuru-nee and I haven't gone further than kissing with Aocchi yet."

"O, oi."

Aoba hurried to stop Mairu, but Yoshikiri hollered again from behind him.

"Uoooooh... I'll kill you! You've kissed but you say you're friends! And with two people! Is this luxury – is this what they call the luxury of a winner?! As I thought I must represent all the single men in the world to kill you Aoba, you bastard... Oi, you guys, let go! Let go dammit!"

Probably considering that the game centre could ban them permanently, the surrounding boys were suppressing Yoshikiri and dragging him off to some other part of the city. Aoba, left behind, sighed deeply, as he proceeded to introduce Kururi and Mairu to the younger boy.

"Let's see, these two are girls from my school. Orihara Kururi and Orihara Mairu. As you see... Well, they give off completely different airs, but as you can tell from their faces, they're twins."

Then Aoba continued, introducing the younger boy to Kururi and Mairu.

"This is Kotonami. He'll be coming to Raira this year; he's our junior."

"Hi, I'm Kotonami Kuon."

"Kuon-kun? It's kind of a cool name~"

"Really? Thanks."

Kuon smiled and shrugged, and Mairu, scrutinising him from head to toe, and continued:

"But speaking of which, your getup's very funky. Were you really in middle school up till recently?"

Mairu was frank in voicing her opinion, but it was not unusual for her to think this.

For his appearance was not one that could conceivably be linked to someone who had just graduated middle school.

Around his ears his hair was not only shaved close but had tramlines, and the rest of it had been grown out and dyed a shocking green. His ears were pierced with elaborate earrings, and were about as strikingly individualistic as his hair.

His face itself was well-natured, but were anyone to see him their eyes would certainly be drawn to his jewellery first. The boy's appearance was one where even in a visual kei band he would probably be the especially eye-catching member.

Mairu's eyes glowed with interest, but – Aoba grinned as he showed her his phone.

"Him, from before last month."

"Wait, Kuronuma-senpai! Sto..."

Dodging Kuon's arm as he tried to steal the phone, Mairu took the phone from Aoba's hand.

And seeing the photo on the display, of the spectacled boy with a black-haired bob who could only be some serious top scorer, Mairu clutched her stomach and guffawed, while Kururi shook as she desperately contained her laughter.

"Ahahahahaha! Well done! Is this your high school debut?! Or did you start a visual kei band?"

It's all right It matches you

"...peace...balance..."

At the reaction of the two, Kuon flushed bright red, and began to wave his fists.

"Ahhhhhh! You suck, Kuronuma-senpai! You're terrorising me! It's bullying! It's like the mother-in-law picking on the new wife!"

"Come on, it's easier to introduce you like this anyway."

Going along with Aoba's chuckling, Mairu laughed for a while – but abruptly, without any change of expression, she asked a question.

"But the high school debut's just on the outside, right?"

"Eh?"

"You knew Aocchi before, and you're still hanging out with him now; that means **you were already indecent before, already had something broken somewhere, was already good-for-nothing...** right?"

"..."

The boy fell silent at what the girl said. Mairu's way of thinking was not because she was particularly twisted in some way.

Anyone who knew Kuronuma Aoba or the Blue Square well would probably think the same.

Unlike his face, Kuronuma Aoba's personality was extremely malicious; he was the kind of person to use others as stepping stones for his own enjoyment. He was a boy who had, during his middle school years, formed the colour

gang the Blue Square, and without taking responsibility himself, put high schoolers and others even older – even his own brother – up on a pedestal, and, from a safe position, posed as the one pulling the strings. There was no way someone such a person chose to bring around could be simply a middle schooler excited about delinquency. There was a hidden truth. Anyone who knew of Aoba's true nature would have arrived at that conclusion.



Although even with this in mind, Mairu, who broached this boldly right in front of Kuon, could be called eccentric herself.

After some time, with an air different from before and a smile from which coldness could somehow be felt, Kuon murmured. "...Your girlfriend's an interesting person, isn't she, Kuronuma-senpai." "She's not my girlfriend, I said. Even if I were to get one I'd definitely prefer Kururi..." "Ah, you'll say something like that?! Aocchi?! Isn't that a little rude?!" There was Mairu, making a loud fuss, and Kururi, who did not seem particularly moved. Kuon watched his seniors, and raising a hand, began to leave.

"Well, I shouldn't bother you. I'll be joining the rest to try calming Yoshikiri-senpai down."

"Ah, oi. You don't have to..."

"I wish you happiness, Kuronuma-senpai~"

The boy left, his voice light as ever, and Aoba, seeing this, sighed deeply.

"Hey, don't say I never warned you – you shouldn't get too deeply involved with him."

"Eh~. Aren't you contradicting yourself? You're rather involved with him yourself, Aocchi."

"No... How do I say – he's a bit of an eccentric, so..."

Aoba mumbled incoherently, but then, as if finally having made up his mind, he spoke to the two again.

"That guy – he looks so showy, but I heard he topped Raira's entrance exams."

"Ehhh? Really?! What a genius, a professor!"

Amazing

"...shock..."

"Yeah, he was chosen to represent the freshmen to greet the school, but he looks like that, right? So they rushed to switch and choose someone else."

Aoba averted his eyes as he said this, while Mairu, pressed on with more questions.

"Why's a kid like that with your gang, Aocchi?"

"Don't say it like we're stupid. ...Well, we have a bit of a give-and-take relationship... Put simply, he's one of our major financiers."

"Ehh?! A sponsor?!"

"Don't say it like that."

Aoba smiled bitterly, while Mairu grabbed his collar with both hands and began to shake him.

"Wait! So that kid has a rich family and all of you are extorting him or something?!"

How cruel

"...evil..."

"Wai... no! No! It's not like that!"

"Then what is it?"

To Mairu, who had for now stopped manhandling him, Aoba, after some coughing, began to explain.

"That guy, he has his own source of income. We help with that and get the leftovers. Well, it's like we're working part time at a store he runs... something like that. Though there isn't actually a store."

"You can't be manufacturing drugs... or growing marijuana..."

"No, no, it's not like that! It's borderline still legal. ...mostly."

"Ahhh! I got it! I know!"

Interrupting Mairu, who seemed about to say something, Aoba said,

"I'll say this first: we're not a hub for refugees from the law or anything like that, okay?"

"Tch."

"Isn't this where you're meant to be relieved...?"

Aoba sighed once more, exasperated, and Kururi moved closer to ask:

What kind of work

"...what...work...?"

"It's hard to put it simply..."

Tell us

"...answer...?"

"..."

Worn down by Kururi's persistent gaze, Aoba sighed deeply again, and answered.

"Honestly; you two really throw people off... Well whatever. In a nutshell, we do everything. In different situations we've acted as news reporters or faked things like on TV; we've started commotions in the city for that too."

"? How does that become money?"

"He has the connections to turn that into money. And we're holding on to his biggest source of cash. Though we don't let him have at it so easily."

"A source?"

Mairu caught on that this was one of Kuon's 'sources of income'; Aoba, bitter humour in his voice, replied. "You two should know as well, Mairu."

"?"

"It's the Headless Rider."

"!"

At this familiar term suddenly brought up, Kururi and Mairu exchanged glances.

"Kuon's really eccentric. Cause he isn't dealing with bounties or anything of the sort; he tries to make money off the existence of the Headless Rider itself."

"Make money from the Headless Rider?! What's that even mean?!"

"...No, not just the Headless Rider."

There Aoba thought of the gaudy face of his junior, and smiled with heartfelt cheer.

"He's like a terrible snake."

"A snake?"

Mairu puzzled, and Aoba continued:

"He wants to swallow Ikebukuro itself whole, himself included."



一章

Chapter 1A

The Seeker

Excerpt of a report by Tatsugami Aya, novice reporter at *Tokyo Warrior*.

Ikebukuro has an urban legend of a headless rider. However, when it comes to urban legends, the idea of a headless rider itself was not born in Ikebukuro.

There was no specific region that could be specifically identified as the origin, but when the rumours had first begun to spread it was all across the country.

The story had at first spread with a strong spiritual theme, revolving around the vengeance of a motorcyclist who had been decapitated by a wire strung across the road.

The shock of the decapitation, combined with spiritual factors, birthed an urban legend – by these requirements alone it is unsurprising for various forms of the myth to have sprung up in different regions. But the case of Ikebukuro is somewhat different.

If one were to say how, it would be that the legend could be described to be more like an Unidentified Mysterious Animal (UMA) like the Loch Ness or Yeti.

After all, irrelevant to whether the figure of the Headless Rider emanates any sense of supernaturality (setting aside whether that exists), tens of thousands of people can see it.

It was captured clearly on cameras and broadcast on TV, resulting in the entire country coming to know of it.

Normally this would be where one assumed it was just special effects, but there were too many witnesses.

Moreover this Headless Rider has apparently been showing up around Ikebukuro for more than 20 years, and only with the increasing popularity of camera-equipped mobile phones came to be captured on camera.

At first due to its exoticness the mass media would buy such filmed data, but now there is too much and the videos are common enough they only feel like videos of dogs and cats on the internet.

Even so, except for those in Ikebukuro who have witnessed it, whether there actually is a headless being driving around the city is probably only half-believed at the moment.

At first I as well had thought that the footage caught on the TV camera was only a trick video.

It was footage from on-scene filming with the police, but it was not unthinkable that the on-scene filming itself could have been a faked performance.

That was what I thought; I felt it was no different from forged photographs that go viral on the internet.

In fact, that was what I thought all until meeting 'it' in the city of Ikebukuro.

A motorcycle that sped past with a soundless engine, and did not even reflect light.

The being that rode it wore a helmet, so I did not know if its head was truly missing, but that was the least of my concerns.

The fact that even travelling extremely fast there was not even the slightest sound of the engine running was by itself extremely unusual.

To make things stranger, the Headless Rider, who appeared to be being chased by a white motorcycle, with a black

substance from its own body – that could only be described as ‘shadow’ – created a black road before it. Honestly, after seeing a scene as unbelievable as a motorcyclist travelling on a road of their own making, whether or not the Headless Rider was indeed headless became no more than a petty detail.

From that point on, I have sought the Headless Rider.

As a result, I have attained certain curious pieces of information.

When a King Television reporter interviewed it on the road, I understood that the Headless Rider communicated its will through a handheld electronic device.

Due to the scene in that video where the motorcycle without headlights had transformed into a headless horse, it was said on the internet that the Headless Rider could be a dullahan.

A dullahan is a type of fae from Ireland, a being that informs those soon to die of their imminent demise.

The dullahan carries its head under its arm, but the Headless Rider has never travelled carrying its head in that manner.

Or perhaps it has, but at least it was not when I witnessed it, and after thoroughly searching on video sites where videos of the Headless Rider are common, there were none depicting it carrying its head.

Amongst the many bases of the theory that the Headless Rider is a dullahan, the root seems to be a vague rumour that the headless horse’s name is Shooter.

Apparently the horse the dullahan rides is known as a coiste bodhar, and ‘Shooter’ could be a spin on that.

(T/N: The katakana for coiste bodhar is koshuta bawaa; katakana for Shooter is shuutaa. Thus Shooter can be seen as an abbreviation of coiste bodhar.)

Honestly, naturally, I felt it was ridiculous.

And there was no way the Headless Rider would use such an easy nickname like an elementary schooler.

But the important thing is the fact that rumours were spreading at all from something as ridiculous as this.

Countless spreading rumours can sometimes hide a truth.

It is possible for the Headless Rider to be the being known as the dullahan, but even if it were that fact would have been buried under the dubious nature of the rumours, and ended up ambiguous.

Although it does indeed have many similarities with the dullahan of mythology – due to how unexplainable it would be to have an Irish fae running around Ikebukuro, Japan, I eventually dismissed that theory and merely kept it in mind.

Another piece of information that caught even more of my interest was its connection with a violence organisation, the ‘Awakusu-kai’, whose office is based in Ikebukuro, and the gang known as the Dollars. Also curious is the man in the bartender suit that has often accompanied it.

And the slashing incident known as Ripper Night that tore its way through Ikebukuro two years ago.

When I heard that the Headless Rider was involved in even that, I could not contain myself.

According to Niekawa-senpai, apparently there was once an information broker familiar with such things, but he became uncontactable about one and a half years ago.

One and a half years ago – was the unexplainable incident involving the Dollars, and an incident where the sky of Ikebukuro was covered in a mysterious shadow.

Could they all be connected?

I get the feeling that all of these individual incidents have the Headless Rider at their centre.

In my mind, that supposition has gradually become a belief.

From now on as well, I plan to investigate deeper into what I've found.

Even in the city of Ikebukuro, the Headless Rider is becoming a powerful presence.

Some years ago there was even an incident during the land speculation uproar where a landshark impersonated the Headless Rider and wrecked havoc all over the city.

(T/N: Plot from the PSP game, with which I am unfamiliar.)

Simply put, they intended to manipulate prices by painting the Headless Rider as a dangerous figure, and even collaborated with politicians to obtain redevelopment rights.

In short, for the residents of Ikebukuro, the Headless Rider has long been accepted as a part of the city.

There are probably people who are friendly towards it and those who despise it.

Even so, it appears that many residents accept the existence of the Headless Rider as a fact.

It is an unidentified monster, but it is a definite existence in this world. If its identity were to be exposed, would the world undergo a change?

I have even begun to have this misconception.

No – it may not necessarily be a misconception.

Will this become reporting material eventually, or will it not?

That is no longer the priority. I simply, for the sake of sating my own curiosity, want to expose the identity of the Headless Rider.

Memo

- The Headless Rider is female?
- There are accounts that it goes by 'Celti'.
- Relation to the Dollars' incident one and a half years ago?
- Connected to the head thrown onto the streets about the same period?
- After the police car was attacked and the head stolen, it went missing.

※ In the Dollars' incident a gun was shot at the Awakusu-kai and the police station. ↑ Related?!

- Many witness accounts around Kawagoe Highway.
- Was able to contact a major information source.
- Notes of the results to be continued.



And leaving behind this incomplete report, the novice reporter Tatsugami Aya vanished.

Her notebook computer open on her desk in the editorial department, the text file open.

It looked like she had left her workplace after typing the hurried words on the screen.

She was unreachable by email or mobile; not even her family could contact her.

Exactly who was this 'major information source'?

Colleagues and the heads of the editorial department tried to find out, to no avail.

They did not even know how she had contacted the informant – by phone, mail, e-mail?

And she had disappeared with her mobile on her; save for the police there was no one who could even check her call history.

As a result, without a single hint to the editorial department, she vanished.

Eventually a rumour spread about the novice reporter who had gone missing in pursuit of the Headless Rider: She had come to know of the Headless Rider's true identity.

That was why she had been vanished.

Had she been swallowed into the shadows of the Headless Rider, or abducted by the Awakusu-kai?

The rumours spread – and merely half a day after being reported missing the information had spread across the internet, and she herself became part of the urban legends surrounding the Headless Rider.

A myth, in somewhat bad taste, quietly began to squirm across the internet –

'Those who know of the Headless Rider's identity will be decapitated and die.'

'Although it's searched for its head for so long, the Headless Rider's already strangled the real thing.'

'If you look too deeply into the Headless Rider, it will come to you.'

'Those who know too much about it will get a message from the Headless Rider on their phones.'

'The message will say: [You know so much about me – are you me? Are you my head?]

'And the moment you look up from the screen of your phone you'll be decapitated, and dragged into the shadows.'

Rumours last no more than 75 days.

(T/N: Proverbial: 'Rumours are short-lived'.)

In the end, how long would the rumours of the supernatural continue?

No one knew.

In all this, only one number was certain.

It had been 15 days since the disappearance of Tatsugami Aya.

Her survival was still unconfirmed.

Chapter 1B

The Visitor

April. Ikebukuro.

On that day, a boy from Akita arrived at Ikebukuro.

There was hardly anyone who knew how he had been feared as a 'monster' back in his hometown.

As it was a new location it was to the boy as though a new world had opened up for him, and Ikebukuro, itself, accepted this new person.

Of course, whether it would truly turn out to be a new world to the boy would only be determined later by his meetings and encounters.

After getting off the Shinkansen, the boy, taking the Yamanote Line, was shocked at the chaos in the trains in the city.

That was the first emotion he felt toward the city of Tokyo.

The past times he had come, a few months ago for the entrance exam and last month to fill in forms for entering the school, he had been escorted by car from the airport by his hosts, who were his relatives, and so up till now he had not been able to get a feel of the crowd.

Finally, today, the boy had left the countryside and in order to repay his hosts had come to the city on his own – but he was already beginning to regret choosing a high school in Tokyo.

People, people, people. No matter where he turned his surroundings were overflowing with them; even back in his hometown he had never been so enclosed by people.

The boy had begun to feel dizzy from the crowd. The gossip of the passengers beside him reached his ears:

"Speaking of Ikebukuro~, is that Headless Rider still around?"

"Who knows. Hasn't been making the news lately."

"And there was something called the Dollars too, wasn't there."

"Yeah, it was popular about the same time as the Headless Rider, right?"

As he could not even move, the boy only heard voices, and was unable to discern the appearances of the ones speaking. But judging from their voices and the way they spoke, he could imagine that they were females students in high school or university.

As other sounds filled the train, the boy was drowned in the myriad of rhythms.

Eventually the train arrived at Ikebukuro Station, and following the flow of the crowd, he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Ikebukuro..."

His hosts were supposed to welcome him at that meeting point.

There were still three minutes to the appointed time.

He had thought he would be able to make it with time to spare, but not knowing the location of the quintessential 'Ikebukuro', by the time he had reached with the assistance of the station officers it was already about 10 minutes

past the meeting time.

When the boy had finally reached the Ikebukuro statue it was crammed with people.

It appeared to be a standard meeting point, what with the sea of people milling about the statue of the owl.

Just as he was loitering around, not knowing what to do, a voice came from behind him.

“Hey, Yahiro-kun. It’s been a month, huh.”

When he turned, standing behind him was a man of about 30 years, wearing a smart suit.

Remembering the man’s face, the boy whose name had been called – Mizuchi Yahiro – bowed his head anxiously.

“It’s been a while, Togusa-san.”

“Ah, it’s all right. There’s no need to be so polite.”

As the man said this, he glided forward.

“So; I’ll escort you to the house. We’ll be taking a taxi.”

The serious man smiled friendly, and Yahiro bowed again.

The man’s name was Togusa Jiro.

(*Saburo – ‘third son’, Jiro – ‘second son’.)

He was a distant relation of Yahiro’s father, who had married into the Mizuchi family; a young entrepreneur who operated a number of apartments in Ikebukuro’s vicinity.

There was an empty room in the apartment built next to their own, which would now be made useful for his stay.

Being that they would have to take him in for three years of high school, he had thought it might be a bother, but the manager, Jiro’s older sister, had said, “It’s no problem at all; some accident happened before so normal guests wouldn’t stay there anyway,” which was information he hadn’t really wanted to hear.

“Actually the plan was to get Saburo to drive the van out like when you had your exams, but seems like Hijiribe Ruri’s got a concert today. It was a flat no.”

Jiro, in the back seat of the taxi, brought up his brother’s name and smiled resignedly.

“Saburo’s a total fan of Hijiribe Ruri, honestly. I’m quite sure his rank in the fanclub’s single-digit, too.”

Saburo was the name of his younger brother who owned a large van, and had fetched him around during the exams and such. However all that remained in his memory were Saburo’s friends, the man and woman in the back of the van, who had chattered at him about manga and anime the whole way, such that he could hardly remember the face of the driver.

“Is Hijiribe Ruri as popular with your generation?”

“Ah... yes. I’m a fan too.”

“Ah, it’s good that she’s popular with youngsters too. Though I don’t know much about idols. I’m grateful for Hijiribe Ruri. My younger brother was a brute who only ever went around fighting; when he’s chasing her he becomes more human.”

“...fighting?”

Yahiro responded to Jiro’s words.

Without a second thought to the meaning of what Yahiro had said, Jiro smiled as he replied.

“Yeah, I’m not too clear on that either, but looks like he even joined gangs like that Blue and Dollar and whatnot

before. It looks like he's just following a few friends now, though. Well, the leader of that group, Kadota-kun, he's a chivalrous kid hard to find these days, and he works as a plasterer, so he comes over to do repairs on our walls now and then."

"Kadota-san... huh."

"Yep. Well, in the past he was always with Ikebukuro's colour gangs. Apparently some kids came over from Saitama and caused some havoc, and there was a lot of big stuff. But you hardly see colour gangs around now. Since last year the kids with the yellow bandanas have been disappearing, too."

At Yahiro, who remained wordless, Jiro continued his monologue.

This, in fact, made Yahiro happy.

Because it had been a long time since anyone besides his family had spoken to him normally like this.

The boy thought.

—How much had this person heard of him from his father and the rest of his family?

Even Yahiro himself understood his own ill reputation at his hometown.

That was what had led him to come to this new world.

Since his childhood he had been embroiled in a senseless amount of fighting.

Even if he were to avoid it where possible and force a smile, there was no guarantee that the degree of violence directed towards him would stop – but by the time he had matured enough to realise that, it was too late.

There were three things he looked forward to in the new world of Ikebukuro.

The first was that, in a land where his reputation was unknown, he might be able to live a normal life.

The second was that – should that fail, even if he were to be dragged into fighting – if strange people were as rampant as he had seen on the internet, perhaps things could settle without him being called a monster.

At the very least, that tourist had told him he was human.

By that alone he had felt that somehow he had been saved.

And the last thing he looked forward to in the district of Ikebukuro –

Was that perhaps he, a being who had given up on everything, would be able to unearth some hope, however slight.

But still he did not know anything of this city.

He had only seen information on it on the internet and on magazines; he had not actually seen the city itself.

Yahiro pulled himself together, and with a serious expression, observed the city outside the taxi window.

Seeing him, Togusa Jiro thought.

—Ah, looking at the city so seriously, he must be looking forward to having a new life.

—What a good kid. Saburo should learn from him.

He, who had not heard a thing about Yahiro from the Mizuchi family, peacefully continued to think such thoughts.

Unwitting of exactly how much fear the boy beside him was regarded with in his hometown.

And like this, a boy came to Ikebukuro.

The city of Ikebukuro accepted the boy no differently from any other visitor.

That was all there was to it.

At least, for now.



A few days later. Raira Academy.

What awaited Yahiro on his entrance to the classroom after the entrance ceremony was an event exceedingly normal for new students; doing a self-introduction in front of all of his classmates.

Currently in progress was that, by seat number, they would one by one stand before the blackboard and give their name with a short self-introduction.

As their seat numbers were ordered based on the hiragana of their names, Mizuchi Yahiro was quite some way down the list.

At the opening of his new life, Yahiro felt a pleasant nervousness as he watched the introductions of his fellow students.

“Kotonami Kuon. Nice to meet you~”

When that boy stood before the blackboard, there was a noticeable change in the atmosphere of the classroom.

Before and after the entrance ceremony Yahiro had glanced at him, but he had not imagined that the boy would be in the same class as himself.

—The colour of his hair’s amazing. It’s green...

—I see, this school doesn’t restrict dyeing or piercing.

Even as he thought this, he was coming to terms with it, thinking perhaps the boy was part of a band or doing something similar.

He had not seen this in his hometown, but it might be a common fashion trend in Tokyo.

But noticing that the classmates around him were eying the boy curiously, Yahiro changed his opinion.

To Yahiro delinquents were merely beings who directed senseless violence toward him – no more than objects of fear.

But in the end he had always been the one called the monster.

He felt that senseless.

It was he who had wanted to call them monsters.

Those who would be violent to a person for no understandable reason were by far the monsters, were they not?

As the gloom of his past memories came to mind, Yahiro grew despondent.

To perk himself up again, he focused once more on the introductions.

Perhaps the green-haired boy from earlier had had too strong of an impact; the only other who drew Yahiro’s attention was a girl with an air of simple beauty.

“Tatsugami Himeka. It’s nice to meet you.”

It was a black-haired girl with a fluid form who appeared to have little if any make-up on.

She was quiet, but not in a timid way, and she spoke her introduction with a smooth, clear tone of voice, such that hearing it Yahiro felt calmed.

—Ah, I thought Tokyo girls all used shoe polish and things on their faces, but apparently not.

—What was it, *ganguro*...?

Before coming here, just how many magazines and information sites had he accumulated?

Having thought of the image of the typical City Girl from more than ten years ago, Yahiro was first surprised at the

many fair-skinned girls in his class.

As he experienced this twisted form of culture shock, the introductions continued –

And finally, it was Yahiro's turn.

"Uh... I'm Mizuchi Yahiro. I came from Akita. Nice to meet you."

—Good, I said that in standard Japanese... right?

Due to the influence of his Tokyo-born father and their guests, and the abundance books and DVD movies in his home, Yahiro could speak standard Japanese normally.

He hardly spoke in school, and perhaps it was because he had no friends either; he in fact had more difficulty with the dialect of his hometown. He could not speak the heavily-accented dialect his grandmother and mother used, but could understand it. And his grandmother could understand standard Japanese due to her work, so there was never any obstacle with communication in the family.

Even so he had felt doubtful as to whether or not he could speak standard Japanese accurately, but by the reaction from the rest of the class, it did not seem to be a problem.

Looking out from behind the teacher's desk it could be seen that everyone's eyes were on him.

Their eyes held no fear or terror or hatred; only pure curiosity.

Those who were uninterested had not been looking this way from the start, so their eyes did not meet at all.

With this situation, the boy felt once more.

That this place was where his value would be reset; a new environment.

As he tasted this emotion that only he could understand, just as with the other students came the short Q&A session.

Other students had not been asked many questions, so Yahiro was thinking he might return to his seat without answering anything –

But one of the girls latched on to the keyword 'Akita', and without raising her hand voiced a question:

"Why did you come here from Akita? It's not like there's a high university entrance rate or anything."

It was a perfectly natural question, but he hesitated.

Why had he come to Ikebukuro?

It was not that he had yearned the city.

It was not a family matter.

And then he realised.

Yahiro, who had specifically come to Raira Academy, which was not any famous school, and full of local children and those from nearer prefectures, was to them a very odd person.

But Yahiro's personality was such that he could not spin a convincing lie on the spot.

And he had no intention of lying.

—Ah, but...

—It would be better to stay mum about the fighting.

—I guess.

Having been surrounded by fear and had a lonely childhood, Yahiro had not learnt the skills to deal with a situation like this.

Even so he wracked his brain to come up with an answer that allowed him to hide a part of the truth instead of lying.

“Um...”

But it came across to the other students as a joke.

“...I came to see the Headless Rider.”

The responding light laughter in the classroom confused Yahiro.

—? ? ?

—Ah, wait, did I say something funny?

It was not mocking laughter, and the atmosphere was only one of laughing at the new student's joke, so it was not exactly a problem.

But if they were to end up saying, ‘There isn't actually a Headless Rider in Ikebukuro,’ he would be at a loss; this uneasiness shook Yahiro's heart.

“I see, you can't find something like the Headless Rider in Akita, huh!”

“I always see it around my house.”

“But it hasn't been around lately?”

Overhearing the conversation between the girls, Yahiro heaved a sigh of relief.

—Thank goodness.

—It's here after all – the Headless Rider.

With this reassurance he looked around the classroom once more, and noticed something.

Of those who had had no interest in Yahiro's introduction and had not been looking, two were now staring at him strangely.

—...?

One was the green-haired boy, Kotonami Kuon.

The other was the beautiful girl who had gotten Yahiro's attention before; Tatsugami Himeka.

Kuon had a smile on his face, but the meaning behind the smile was visibly different from those around him.

His eyes were those of a child who had found an interesting toy.

Although that was concerning, to Yahiro Himeka's gaze was even more so.

There was no particular expression on her face, but she was not smiling in the slightest.

The girl merely turned her sharp, cold eyes toward him, which bothered him –

But in the current situation there was no way Yahiro could have spoken to her.



After school.

Somehow having made it through the first day without disaster, Yahiro began to pack his things.

The students around him had already finished their preparations to go home, and talked to their friends from middle school as they left the classroom.

Of course, there were none of his peers from his middle school.

Even if there were, he had no friends.

It would be ridiculous for him to approach them and ask for them to go home with him.

—Friends, huh.

—I've never had them before.

Letting out a small sigh, Yahiro thought.

—Even if I could make some, they would probably pull away if they knew my past.

—If they'll just cut ties and think badly of me anyway then it might be less troublesome to not make friends altogether.

While Yahiro thought this he finished packing his belongings, and carrying his bag over his shoulder he stood from his seat.

He leant on the window, and looked outside.

Seeing the scenery of Ikebukuro, completely different from that of his hometown, stretch out before him, Yahiro felt a strange ecstasy.

—Ah, what's this...

—This is... excitement, isn't it.

—It might be the first time I've felt something like this.

Feeling the ache rise from the bottom of his stomach, Yahiro could not help but smile.

And thinking that there probably wouldn't be anyone now left he turned around —

He met the girl's eyes again.

In his surprise he could only stare back.

It was a face hard to forget.

Tatsugami Himeka stared at him with the same eyes as before.

"...is anything wrong?"

The girl touched her cheek and asked, and Yahiro jolted.

With the realisation that his face had frozen midsmile.

"Ah, no, nothing. I smiled because I was looking at the city."

"...is there anything interesting about the city?"

"No, not really."

"Fuun..."

Himeka tilted her head slightly, and looked over her shoulder to the scenery outside the window.

Faced with this, Yahiro was frozen, at a loss to what to do.

There was no one but Himeka and himself left in the classroom.

Was she not going home with her local friends?

As Yahiro thought this Himeka ended her look outside the window, and looked again towards him, and said.

"You're weird, aren't you."

"Eh... really?"

—What should I do?

—Maybe I did something rude to her.

He had not sensed any malice or mockingness in the statement 'You're weird', but Yahiro, who had little experience

with socialising, could not help but feel anxious that he might have done something wrong.

Then the girl, expressionless, spoke.

“Hey.”

“Y, yeah?”

“Was that a joke, just now? Or were you serious?”

“Just now?”

—What should I do?

—I must have done something wrong...

To Yahiro, who was desperately recalling everything he had done today, Himeka said:

“During the introductions, when you said you came to see the Headless Rider.”

“Eh?”

After an instant, Yahiro remembered what he had said.

“Ah, oh, that...”

“What was it? Was it a joke after all?”

“...Could it be that everyone heard it as a joke?”

“Eh?”

This time it was Himeka who was puzzled.

“Didn’t everyone laugh?”

“Ah, I see... I see.”

—I see, so they thought it was a joke.

—That’s why they laughed.

—...Why did they think it was a joke?

—Is it so strange to want to see the Headless Rider?

To the people of Ikebukuro, the Headless Rider was no longer a particularly exotic being.

That was why they had thought it impossible that someone would make a decision for the three years of their life in high school solely to see it, and so they had interpreted it as a joke –

But no one knew that to Yahiro, it was something he could well spend the rest of his life doing, much less three years.

Of course, including the girl in front of him now.

“Ah, thanks for telling me. I understand now.”

Not understanding why he was thanking her, the girl hesitated visibly.

But without changing her expression, calmly, she continued with her previous question.

“...So, you were serious?”

“Well, it was one of the reasons.”

“...I see.”

Himeka’s voice was still even, even as she said, bluntly, to Yahiro:

“You should stop.”

“Eh?”

“Don’t get too involved with the Headless Rider.”

“Why?”

It was only natural for Yahiro to ask this, but Himeka merely shook her head.

"I can't tell you."

"Huh?"

"Anyway, I've warned you."

And with that the girl turned on her heel, about to make a quick exit.

"Wait!"

A normal boy would have been unable to do anything but watch her leave –

But Yahiro's reflexes that were accustomed to fights reacted immediately to the girl's movement, **unfortunately**.

Yahiro, **without hesitation in the least, grabbed the back of the girl's collar, and yanked hard.**

"Eh... Guh..."

Himeka's body was forced backward as she choked and her air was cut off.

"..."

Registering the flailing of the girl, Yahiro hurriedly released her.

"Ahh?! S, sorry! I just..."

After coughing for a while, Himeka breathed deeply, and stared at Yahiro.

"...I didn't think you would even strangle me to keep me from going."

There was not a sliver of hatred on her face, purely surprise.

But Himeka's face, perhaps by nature, was cold and had little change of expression, so it was completely impossible to grasp her emotions.

"I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine now."

"Sorry... I, I was scared, and I just..."

"...Scared?"

Again she was confused. Yahiro said, to her:

"Yeah, I, I'm more timid than most people... You said something that made me feel uneasy, and then you couldn't tell me why... So suddenly I got frightened... Ah, no, it was inexcusable, wasn't it? Sorry."

Yahiro bowed his head low again; Himeka sighed deeply, and asked, calmly:

"...You're timid, but you want to see the Headless Rider?"

"Yeah, I want to see it, because I'm timid."

"?"

"It's complicated."

Himeka fell silent for a while, not understanding Yahiro –

But as it became clear that he was not going to elaborate, she spoke again.

"You're weird after all."

"Maybe."

"Then let's make it an exchange."

"An exchange?"

At her sudden suggestion, now it was Yahiro's turn to be puzzled.

"If you tell me why you want to see the Headless Rider, I'll tell you why you shouldn't get too close to the Headless

Rider.”

It was still even-toned, but there was a touch of initiative in her voice.

“That’s...”

“Well; tomorrow would be all right too. It’s not like you’re going to patrol the city looking for the Headless Rider right after this, right?”

“Yeah, anyway it’s only my first day.”

Seeing him nod honestly, the girl slowly nodded herself.

“Then that should be all right.”

Then Himeka straightened her crumpled collar, and made her way out.

Abruptly, she stopped at the door, and turned to speak.

“I’m sorry.”

“Eh?”

To Yahiro, who could not fathom why he was being apologised to, she continued.

“Earlier... I didn’t mean to scare you; it was honestly supposed to be a warning.”

Yahiro could only watch the back of the girl as she left, this time unable to stop her.



At the school gates.

“Ah, I should’ve apologised again properly for choking her by the collar...”

As he sunk into this self-loathing, Yahiro gradually left the school behind him.

As he was about to leave the school gates, a boy called out to him.

“Yo. Doing fine, Yahiro-kun?”

Calling out to him flippantly like they were old friends was the boy whose face he had remembered immediately during the introductions.

“Uh, you’re... Kotomine-kun?”

“Wait, no, no! It’s Kotonami, Ko~to~na~mi! Well, just call me Kuon. It’s easier to remember, right? Besides, I called you by name first, so that makes it even!”

Laughing as he said this wilfully, green hair swept by the wind, was Kotonami Kuon.

Yahiro, having been spoken to so suddenly and so cheerfully, hesitated for the same reason as with Himeka before.

—Uh.

—Did I do anything to him?

His doubts aside, Kuon’s onslaught of words continued like the firing of a machine gun.

“I waited very long but you never came, see~ I thought you might’ve went around to look at the school. Aw, I should have toured around myself. Club recruitment starts tomorrow, so there probably won’t be a chance. Ah, have you chosen a club or committee? I’d recommend the library committee, what d’you think? Though I’m not joining anything myself because it’s troublesome.”

“...I see, thanks for telling me.”

Even in his dilemma Yahiro thanked Kuon with an impossible honesty.

Kuon slapped his shoulder, and continued the one-sided conversation.

"Well~, it came to me when we were doing introductions! That I could be good friends with you, Yahiro-kun! After all, our high school ambition's the same!"

"Eh?"

Yahiro was further confused; Kuon smiled as he asked.

"Are you free now? Any plans?"

"No, not really for until I have to go back to the hostel."

"I see; any curfew? Ah, well, commonsensically until about eight would be fine, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Yahiro replied vaguely, and hearing that, Kuon clapped his hands together.

"Then it's set! Let's go!"

"Where?"

"The city of Ikebukuro. Maybe our target'll be around West Gate Park."

"To do what?"

Was he planning to pick up girls or something?

—What should I do? I've never tried picking up girls before.

—It would be bad to burden a classmate from the first day of school...

—And I just choked Himeka-san just now...

Yahiro felt this oddly irrelevant uneasiness, but it was swiftly interrupted by Kuon.

"To do what – isn't it obvious? We're searching."

"For what?"

"For what, you say."

Shrugging lightly, Kuon smiled, and did a thumbs-up to the sky.

"We'll be the ones to find the Headless Rider, yeah?"

Interlude: Rumours on the Internet ①

Ikebukuro Information Site, *IkeNEW! Version IKEBUKURO*

Popular article, 'Announcing the end of an urban legend': *The Headless Rider hasn't been showing up lately, has it*

'Where did the Headless Rider go?' – (Extract from Tokyo Warrior Digital Edition)

In the past there was an urban legend, the 'Headless Rider', that walked the streets of Ikebukuro, but from half a year ago it seems the number of sightings have dropped drastically.

The 'Headless Rider' was caught clearly on film three years ago on an on-scene documentary with the police from King TV, and created a nationwide boom. There had already been sightings in the Tokyo region more than 20 years ago, though this was relatively unknown.

With a considerable bounty on its head put out by the president of a talent production company, there was also a Headless Rider Hunt, but even after that the Headless Rider continued its reckless driving without headlights without a care.

A motorcycle that emits no sound from its engine, and transforms to a headless horse. And on it a headless rider in pure black armour.

It is a being that whose sighting would surely be burnt into the eyes and become a traumatic experience.

Nevertheless, perhaps because it went around normally on a highway, there was no decrease in witnesses.

But about half a year ago the uploading of videos of sightings of the Headless Rider ceased abruptly, and searches for 'Headless Rider' on social networking sites turned up only microblogging about the lack of recent sightings.

Regarding this, Tsukumoya Shinichi-shi, a writer based in Ikebukuro, only commented on his blog that, "The Headless Rider's just tired of churning out rumours. They'll probably come back after a break."

[\(Click here for the full article\)](#)

IkeNEW! Administrator's Comment

"I didn't know, but looks like it's been sighted since more than 20 years ago-nari.

So if they started it at about 20 years old that person would be more than 40-nari.

Did they realise how embarrassing it was to be cosplaying at that age-nari?

It's an age where you learn self-respect after all-nari~

It applies to those of you who still watch kids' anime past 40, you know-nari?"

Administrator *Lila Tailtooth Zaiya*



Excerpts of typical tweets from microblogging site *Twittia*.

The Headless Rider hasn't been showing up lately.

- They're probably gone. It was just a fad. A one-hit wonder.
 - No it wasn't. They've been around since I was a kid.
 - About that, I heard they've been around since my father's time.
 - How old is the Headless Rider anyway?

Speaking of the Headless Rider, the year before something amazing happened, right? There was a day where the sky went all dark and stayed that way even through morning. I wonder if that was the Headless Rider's shadow.

- Yeah, it happened! I wonder what that really was.
 - Didn't they say it was caused by sand?
 - There's no way that was sand. Anyway, the night before that day was really eventful, wasn't it? So many things happened. The bosozoku made a huge commotion. And wasn't there a shooting incident?
 - Yeah, it happened. A high school student got hit by a stray bullet and died or something, I think?
 - Didn't he survive?
 - I think he survived.
 - More importantly, the Awakusu-kai and the police station were shot at or something, weren't they?

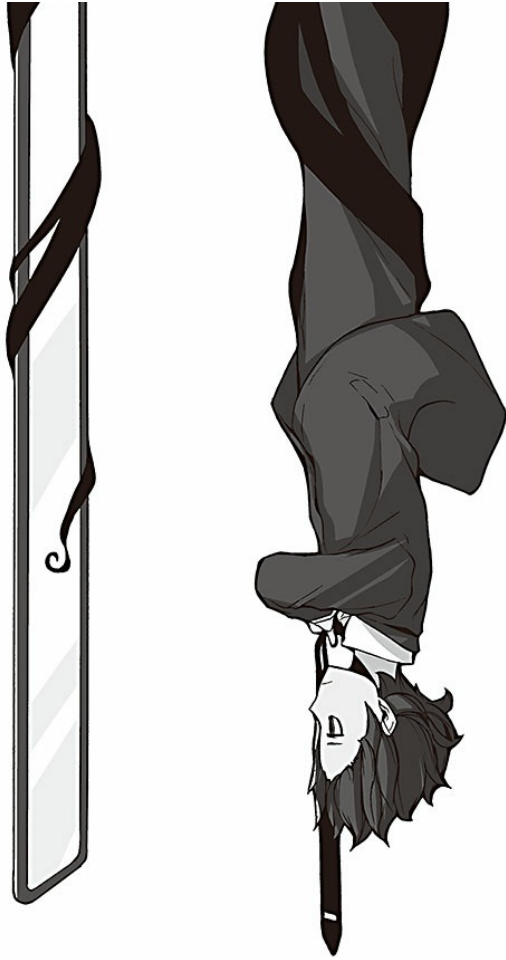
I wonder if we'll never see the Headless Rider again.

- It's fine if we don't. Honestly it's scary when they suddenly swerve to cut in front on the road.
 - They've been good enough to avoid any big accident up till now, though. And they don't even have headlights.
 - Even if they're fine with that, *I'm* scared~

I finally did it. I might be able to meet the Headless Rider.

Tomorrow I'll get to talk to someone who knows the legendary Headless Rider! Looking forward to it!

- Hey~, what happened in the end?
- This is the last post isn't it. Until now you've been blogging every single day.
- It's like a horror story.
- The Headless Rider vanished you lol
 - Apparently they really went missing, it's not a laughing matter.
 - Eh?! Really! I'm sorry.
 - Everyone's worried, so if you're all right please say something ASAP~.



一章

Chapter 2A

The Missing

The Awakusu-kai of Medei Group was one of **those types** of organisation, one that had an extensive territory in Ikebukuro.

With Awakusu Dogen as its leader, it boasted a top-class power status even in the Medei Group, and had marked not only the police but also large companies and mass media with strict attention.

(T/N: Back in *Durarara!!* the Awakusu-kai was middle-class.)

An executive of this organisation, Shiki, had been called to the headquarters of the Awakusu-kai early this morning. Having nothing come to mind at the summons, Shiki went to the headquarters half-warily – Only, waiting for him was a stray bullet from a completely unexpected direction.

“Disappearances, is it.”

In response to Shiki, the man in the leather seat – the young head of the Awakusu-kai, Awakusu Mikiya – replied across a high-quality wooden table.

“Yeah, disappearances. Especially with young people, it’s been happening a lot in our territory.”

Mikiya was the second son of the current leader and the one who came closest to the title of ‘heir’; as there were other officers who begrudged this, he was in a position where he could not at any cost show weakness. In recent years organisations like their own had had few cases where leadership was passed down the bloodline, and moreover Mikiya’s older brother was walking the straight path, so it was known that he had entered this world of his own accord.

He was countering the malicious talk behind his back, that he was riding on his father’s favour, with his own capability, and was currently at heads with one of the executives, Aozaki.

“There’s been everything from kids around 15 to a magazine reporter in her 20s.”

He said this sourly; and Shiki, after a number of seconds considering how to reply, said,

“That’s the first I’ve heard of this – when you say an increase, by how much has it been?”

“I’m not aware of the initial number, but just from what I know there’ve been 15 cases this month.”

“...”

At this information, Shiki sunk into thought briefly.

—Most likely the Young Head has proof from an informant in the police.

—If that’s the case, it’s safe to assume the information is accurate.

—Of course, 15 people missing seems to be a great number, but...

Even so, Shiki reconsidered.

Although the number of missing persons reports that warranted a search request was a varying trend over the years, the average number in the whole of Japan was about 80,000 per annum.

If one were to heed the fact that for many years the number exceeded 100,000, 15 was not a large number at all.

“If you think of Tokyo’s population, and the cases that are runaways, it’s not a very surprising digit, is it? It shouldn’t

be a concern.”

Of course, not all missing persons disappeared as though spirited away; in a large proportion of cases they were found after a search was requested.

“For that matter, if you think of children running away from home... Ah, sorry. I didn’t mean the incident with Miss Akane.”

There Shiki bowed his head. Mikiya had a daughter by the name of Awakusu Akane, who had, while still in elementary school, run away from home for a few days 2 years ago.

“No, it’s all right. At first I thought it could’ve been runaways like our daughter, but...”

“What is it? It couldn’t be something connected to the organisation?”

“It could. No, I would love to think it wasn’t, but even so the guys over at the police are suspecting us.”

“And why so?”

It was true that the Awakusu-kai, by their nature, occasionally **created ‘missing persons’**.

But so far as Shiki was aware, they had never been inclined to whimsically vanishing perfectly innocent people from the streets.

It was one thing to threaten a magazine reporter who had gotten hold of any unpleasant evidence, but there was no reason to go so far as to eliminate a student only around 15 years old.

If the Awakusu-kai distributed drugs it was possible that that child could’ve been a trafficker, but in the first place the Awakusu-kai should have no hand drug dealing.

The leader himself disliked drugs, and moreover one of their executives Akabayashi had an extraordinary hate for them, so no one had been so foolish as to attempt it.

Furthermore, insofar as drugs were the most effective means of income, the Awakusu-kai’s policy was to act in a manner that would give them the home advantage, so it was necessary to avoid repelling the residents of the city more than necessary.

As such, it would be less than advantageous for there to be rumours that the Awakusu-kai were related to the disappearances.

Shiki, gradually understanding Mikiya’s frown, regarded him again with a different perspective.

The leather chair creaked under Mikiya, as he returned Shiki’s question.

“Do you know about the Headless Rider?”

“...”

“You know, right? They’re a courier you and Akabayashi hire now and then.”

“Yes, I suppose. Though they’ve been on leave recently.”

Shiki answered without making to conceal anything, to which Mikiya continued, calmly: “Apparently they took care of Akane somehow. She talks about them occasionally.”

“Yes, during the commotion when she ran away, we paid for their assistance to help her.”

“This might sound too direct, but what are they?”

At this point Mikiya narrowed his eyes.

“It can’t be that there really isn’t anything above their neck, can it?”

“There isn’t.”

“...What?”

“It’s not easy to believe, but it’s true.”

At Shiki, who spoke calmly, Mikiya slammed the table.

"You bastard! It's no time to be making shitty useless jokes!"

Even in the face of a shout that would've caused any other person to recoil, Shiki, with a cool expression, replied courteously. "Young Head. I think you would know best whether I am a person to make **shitty useless** jokes at a time like this."

"..."

At that Mikiya went silent.

Indeed, with Akabayashi it would be unsurprising, but Mikiya knew well that Shiki was not the kind to brush off a question like this with a joke.

That was exactly why he could not easily accept it.

"No... Wait, all right, wait a moment. Nothing above the head... So you've seen the Headless Rider like that before?"

"Yes, which is to say, the Headless Rider is the Headless Rider. It is natural to doubt; I will introduce you directly next time. Head Dogen is aware, though."

"...Dad knows?"

Mentioning the name of Dogen, who was the leader as well as his father, was not something he could interpret as a joke and beat Shiki up for. In the first place, not only Shiki – no one in the organisation would be so extreme as to use Dogen's name for a lie or a joke.

Mikiya could not accept it, but having decided that the conversation could not progress like this, he changed the topic despite still being confused.

"...Well, we can come back to this some other time. Whether the Headless Rider's the real thing or a magician doesn't matter. The problem is that the Headless Rider might have a hand in the disappearances."

"...The Headless Rider?"

"Yeah; the missing people... All of them were big fans of the Headless Rider."

"Fans...?"

At the sudden use of the term, a frown formed on Shiki's face.

"Yeah, fans. They were interested in the Headless Rider, tried to chase them in some way or another. They seem to have become something of an idol with the more air-headed youngsters... Apparently the news reporter who disappeared was also hunting down information on the Headless Rider..."

"Those people have always been around, haven't they. Why suddenly..." "I'd like to know that too. Now and then there've been freelance writers going after the Headless Rider, but that one's the first to disappear. But it looks like it's been spreading badly on the internet or something."

"I see, so it mixed with the rumours that we're connected to the Headless Rider."

As Shiki nodded, his tone agreeing, Mikiya sighed deeply.

To most executives in the organisation it could have appeared as a show of weakness, but perhaps he trusted Shiki that much. Mikiya crossed his fingers on the desk, and met Shiki's eyes as he said:

"...I heard that seniors at Akane's middle school have disappeared, too."

"..."

"In her own way Akane feels a debt for the help when she ran away. So when she heard the rumours that the Headless Rider was responsible she said they wouldn't do something like that; apparently she's looking for the Headless Rider on her own now."

"Whether or not the Headless Rider was responsible, it is something you should stop, hm."

If the 'Headless Rider' Shiki knew of had indeed been behind the disappearances, it would naturally be dangerous for Akane. Other than the fact that they knew Akane's face and position, the fact was that causing mass disappearances could not have been done with a sound mind.

Conversely, if the Headless Rider had no part in the disappearances, it was clear that should this mystery kidnapper hear that Akane was investigating the incidents, she would likely meet the same fate.

"...Of course, I stopped her. But you should know how Akane is."

"Yes. Certainly she would nod on the surface but start something in secret."

"Seriously, who does she take after..."

"..."

—Mikiya gave off that feel when he was younger, too.

Shiki remembered the time Mikiya himself had shaken off all of Awakusu Dogen's regulations and acted irresponsibly, but refrained from mentioning it.

He was not so skilful as to be so sarcastic to a superior.

With Shiki like this, Mikiya continued.

"Well whatever. It'd be much simpler if you could contact the Headless Rider. Get them here as fast as possible... No, it'd be bad for them to come to our headquarters or offices right now. Have them meet you someplace suitable, and ask them if they know anything."

"...I don't think that can happen soon, you know?"

"? Why?"

Shiki shook his head slightly at Mikiya.

"That courier's currently on leave... They're on vacation, with that underground doctor they cohabit with."

"On vacation?"

At Mikiya's frown, Shiki, voice still even, spoke only the truth.

"Not just for the past month; the Headless Rider hasn't been in the city for a good half year."

Chapter 2B

The Gossipmonger

Night. Ikebukuro. Rakuei Gym.

Rakuei Gym was a martial arts dojo that boasted a scale of top-class level in Ikebukuro.

As it was affiliated with the German Traugott Geisendorfer, a champion in the Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) scene, the name of the gym was known worldwide.

While it was technically an MMA gym, it taught various kinds of martial arts such as karate and boxing; even covering martial arts centralised around weapons, such as the sword, spear, or staff.

(*Kendō, sōjutsu, jōjutsu.)

People from those pursuing the martial arts professionally to housewives on diets gathered here; aside from the tension unique to a martial arts gym, it was wrapped in a mixed atmosphere characteristic of a city.

“Wow~, I didn’t think you’d be attending this gym too, Kuon-kun~! I was surprised.”

A scene in the gym.

In response to dogi-clad Mairu, Kuon, who was visiting in his school uniform, scratched his head.

“Well... I was attending the Takadanobaba branch up till I finished middle school, so... We were just on the way home, so I thought it might be fun to drop by.”

“I see; when Aocchi introduced you during the spring break I never thought I’d see you in a place like this.”

“I’m surprised myself.”

The conversation, while not entirely common, was not unnatural either, between fellow students in a new semester.

“And then? Who’s this kid?”

“Ah... Sorry, nice to meet you.”

Bowing his head quickly was Yahiro, who wore the same uniform as Kuon, and had been looking around at the surroundings.

“I’m Kuon’s classmate, Mizuchi Yahiro.”

“Oh~, so that makes you my junior too! Nice meeting you.”

“Yes, please take care of me.”

Mairu looked over the anxious boy, staring.

She was wearing sports spectacles, and seemed to have gotten away from the intense session of spars and matches.

“Fuu~nfunfun, no dye, no piercings. No smell of cigarettes or thinner. Amazing, you’re like a model student, unlike Kuon.”

“Eh... um, thank you very much.”

Having suddenly been passed judgment on, Yahiro thanked her cluelessly.

On the other hand, Kuon frowned as he protested to the girl that was his senior.

“No way, I don’t do cigarettes or sniffing...”

“True~, you must be up to more dangerous things if you’re with Aocchi.”

“Hey, lay off...”

Kuon, who was genuinely agitated; and Mairu, who was chuckling.

As Yahiro stared curiously at the juxtaposition between the two, Mairu looked toward him again.

“So, are you hoping to sign up?”

“No, I thought to just take a tour today...”

Then Kuon interjected from beside him.

“Yeah right, this guy’s a wet blanket~. Mairu-senpa~i...”

Kuon huffed as he dug his elbow into Yahiro.

“We were supposed to go looking for the Headless Rider, but Yahiro absolutely refused~”



It was one hour earlier.

“We’ll be the ones to find the Headless Rider, yeah?”

Kuon exclaimed, but Yahiro replied, abruptly:

“No, I’m stopping for today.”

“Wait, why?! You don’t have anything on, right?”

“Yeah. Anything else is fine, but... I think searching for the Headless Rider will have to wait till tomorrow at least. For today it’s just the Headless Rider that’s out.”

Yahiro calmly asserted this, to which Kuon’s face turned confused.

“Why is the no-go limited to today, and to the Headless Rider even?!”

“...”

There Yahiro sunk into thought.

—Even if you were to ask...

—I was thinking to wait till tomorrow since I was stopped by Tatsugami-san, but...

Would speaking of it be just as impolite as exposing a secret?

It was not as if he had been prohibited from saying it; but Yahiro, who felt that it was not an issue appropriate to divulge, replied to Kuon:

“Sorry, it’s a secret. I can’t say even if we’re friends.”

“Erk, it’s so important?!”

“I’m not sure, is it important...”

Seeing Yahiro honestly begin to worry, Kuon felt a faint sense of culture shock, and said, cold sweat dripping down his cheek:

“You’re weird...”

“Eh?! R, really...?”

—Oh no.

—Did I do something wrong?

Yahiro, who was currently unable to understand the concept of having a comfortable distance between friends, was now forcing an awkward smile, but because he was not used to smiling in the first place, the result was a stiff smile

surfacing under the evening of Ikebukuro.

Kuon, seeing this and unsure how to react, sighed.

“Well, then let’s leave that for today. I might be showing my face at the dojo today too.”

“Dojo?”

“Yeah, Rakuei Gym, it’s called. Up till now I was attending at the dojo at Takadanobaba, but for high school I’m here, right? So from now on I’ll be attending the one in Ikebukuro.”

“Dojo as in... for martial arts? What do you do?”

Yahiro was for some reason suddenly interested, and Kuon smiled friendly as he replied.

“Oh, a lot of things, you know? I’m learning self-defence. There are plenty of things like MMA, karate, boxing, kendo, staff techniques?”

At Kuon’s words Yahiro’s eyes widened slightly, and after some thought, he asked:

“Could I hear more?”



After that conversation, they had decided that Yahiro would come to Rakuei Gym to watch, bringing them here.

“Seriously, I finally I became an Ikebukuran~, but I can’t believe Headless Rider’s so amazingly passive~. It’s like torture by suspense.*”

(*Actual term is a proverb – *hebi no narakoroshi* – killing a snake halfway)

To Kuon, who was still lingering on the Headless Rider, Mairu asked:

“Hm? You two are interested in the Headless Rider?”

“Yeah, I guess. I really was thinking, it’d be nice to see it too~, I guess? Yahiro here’s really diehard, you know? He came all the way from Akita to Tokyo just to see the Headless Rider, you know? Hardcore, ain’t it?”

“Oh~! From Akita just for that?! That’s some willpower! Aren’t you cool.”

To Mairu, whose eyes sparkled as she said this, Yahiro averted his eyes as he replied.

“Ah, no... It’s not like... the Headless Rider was the only reason...”

“? What’s that? So what was the reason? Could it be my body?! But that can’t do, my body belongs to Kuru-nee and Yuhei-san head to toe! It’s reserved! Reserved!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t really get...”

Yahiro was perplexed; Kuon whispered into his ear:

“I just met this person myself, but if you find her annoying it’s fine if you basically ignore everything, all right? In the first place, her older sister would be something else, but this person’s body isn’t quite worth coming down from Akita f...”

“I~ can~ hear~ you~”

Mairu, who had slipped behind him, ground her fists into Kuon’s temples.

“Agagagaga, wait, isn’t that *umeboshi* like what elementary schoolers do?! On the level of *shippe* and head-poking? It’s the first time I see someone actually do it agagagagagaga”

(T/N: *Umeboshi* – what Mairu is doing. *Shippe* – jabbing someone’s wrist with two fingers, apparently)

“I’ll have you know I won’t be giving any information on the Headless Rider to a bad junior who says things like that!”
Information on the Headless Rider.

At those words casually inserted into the conversation, Yahiro and Kuon reacted simultaneously.

"Eh?"

"Wait, Mairu-senpai, do you know something?"

Faced with the confusion of the two, Mairu snickered and said,

"I do. We've met a number of times, and Kuru-nee once had the Headless Rider as something like a bodyguard, you know?"

"Bodyguard?"

Yahiro frowned unconsciously at the term hard to reconcile with the image of an urban legend.

"Yep. Apparently our brother was friends with the Headless Rider."

"Friends, with the Headless Rider?"

Next to Yahiro, who was getting increasingly bewildered, Kuon stared at Mairu and said.

"You're teasing your juniors with those kinds of jokes, again~."

"Ah, by that look of yours, you don't believe it? It's not a joke, and I don't have a lying streak, hm? You can ask Kuru-nee, even Aocchi if you want."

"Kuronuma-sempai?"

There Kuon frowned slightly.

Yahiro glanced between their faces, and tilted his head.

"Kuronuma-sempai?"

"Mm... Ah, he's a senior who's taken care of me since middle school."

Behind Kuon, who was chewing his words, Mairu added, unhesitantly:

"He's the boss of a scary scary army of delinquents, so you have to be careful, you know?"

"Hey! Read the atmosphere!"

"I read it properly, you know? And on top of that I simply ignored it so don't worry!"

"You're so troublesome!"

After a few seconds of frustration, Kuon elaborated on this 'Kuronuma-senpai'.

"Ah, the part about the delinquents is Mairu's misunderstanding. It's just that some of his friends are rowdy. Like, they're quick to get into fights, sort of..."

As if realising he had not quite explained anything, Kuon hurried to change the topic.

"Anyway, more importantly! Now, call your brother right now! Teleteletele! Tele-tele-call-call or no more bet!"

To Kuon, who was making a rhythm on a pillar in the gym with his palm, Mairu smiled as she replied.

"Ahahaha, I can't do that."

"What! That's unfair! You can't just say something and leave it at that!"

At Kuon's pestering, Mairu, her smile never once wavering –

"But Aniki's **been missing for more than a year,**"

said this explosive statement.

"..."

"..."

The two in school uniform looked at one another and fell silent.

With the two of them unsure what to say, Mairu continued, her tone indifferent:

"Ah, don't mind, it's fine, it's fine. He's disappeared plenty of times before, it just happens that it's longer this time."

In response, Yahiro felt just a little relieved.

“Ah, I, I see.”

But that relief was destroyed by Mairu’s next words.

“Anyway, at worst, even if he’s at the bottom of Tokyo Bay, in its own way that end would suit him. If you think of it as just what he expected, then it’s not that bad, hm?”

“...”

As opposed to Yahiro, who had gone silent again, now Kuon spoke.

“No... isn’t that very worrying...? If he knew the Headless Rider and he disappeared, that’s like the recent...”

Just as he said that, another voice came from beside them.

“No, you’re wrong.”

“?”

“The Headless Rider wouldn’t do that.”

The three of them turned towards the voice; there stood a girl one head shorter than Yahiro, wearing a white cotton vest and hakama.

She looked to be in middle school, but there was still some trace of childishness in her face.

She held in her hands an octagonal staff* carved from Japanese red oak, and from that it could be inferred that she was learning jōjutsu in this gym.

(*Hakkaku-bō. Japanese red oak – Akagashi; one of the standard woods for weaponry if you search it up.)

Seeing the girl’s face, Mairu called out.

“Ah. Akane-chan. Yahoo~”

“Orihara-senpai, thank you for today.”

To Akane, who bowed her head courteously, Kuon asked:

“Erm, you are?”

“...Awakusu Akane, from the Rakuei Jōdō Section’s Girls’ Division.”

Just as she had with Mairu, she bowed her head, formally, to the two boys.

“Ah, I’m, uh, I just came to see; I’m Mizuchi Yahiro.”

“Kotonami Kuon; nice to meet you, Ojō-chan.”

“Yes, nice to meet you.”

After listening to their introductions seriously, Akane spoke, once more, to the two she had just met.

“The Headless Rider wouldn’t kidnap anyone.”

They did not know just how much of their conversation she had heard.

Only, it appeared that she had some feelings regarding what Kuon had said, about a link between the disappearance of Mairu’s brother and the Headless Rider.

But Yahiro, who knew nothing of the details, could not join the conversation, and could only listen on to what she said.

“Everyone is... misunderstanding the Headless Rider. That person isn’t a scary monster like the online rumours say...”

Hearing what Akane said unhappily, Yahiro’s heart hurt, slightly.

—Huh?

—What is it... this feeling...

The boy quickly realised what the noise rising in his chest was.

The people who had called him a monster when he was in his hometown.

There were people who looked on the Headless Rider with that same gaze.

In other words, was he not hoping he could direct that same gaze towards the Headless Rider?

To prove he was normal, coming to see the Headless Rider, was that not an arrogant thing to do?

Thinking this, Yahiro fell into a temporary state of melancholy.

—...I...Aren't I being very rude to the Headless Rider...?

—If it's like that, then maybe I'm not human, I'm a monster after all...

Having not noticed that the classmate he had brought here had become gloomy, Kuon asked Akane,

"Akane-chan, right? Could it be that you know the Headless Rider?"

"..."

Akane could not answer Kuon's question.

Rather, she looked at him warily.

It was a natural reaction considering his unique hair colour and his piercings, but it seemed that besides that there were some other feelings swirling within her.

"Wait, don't be so scared~. See, it's like that. There're some frogs in the jungle that look super bright, aren't there?

Like the poison dart frog. It's just like that, just like that."

"It's lethal, isn't it."

"It's called the *poison* dart frog, too..."

Ignoring the murmuring from Mairu and Yahiro behind him, Kuon made a friendly approach towards Akane.

"And besides, it's not like we think the Headless Rider is evil or anything. That's why we want to know what kind of person they are."

"Well, you should leave it at that, Kuon."

"Eh?"

"Akane-chan's in the broadcast committee, see? Her senior in that committee went missing just a while ago."

"..."

"That's the second time in a row you're saying things without reading the atmosphere, isn't it~. Though I'm not the one who minds."

To Kuon, who had broken out in cold sweat, Akane said,

"...It's true that my senior was a big fan of the Headless Rider. ...But I thought it wouldn't do to cause trouble for the Headless Rider, so I kept it a secret from her. That I knew the Headless Rider."

Akane continued, looking away sadly.

"But... she suddenly disappeared... And everyone's just coming up with their own conclusions..."

What came to her mind was a memory from one week ago, of the senior she had met during the spring break.

—'Hey, hey, Awakusu-san. I might finally be able to meet the Headless Rider!'

That senior had been a student president in their elementary school, and her 'Headless Rider mania' was well-known in the school.

Akane had wanted to introduce them, but to do that she would have had to go through her 'family', and that was the one thing she had wanted to avoid at all costs.

—'If I really get to know the Headless Rider, sometime I'll introduce them to you too, Awakusu-san!'

A mere few days later.

This upperclassman, who had worried about Akane when she had been unhappy for various reasons – who should have become her senior at the same middle school – Akane heard that she had disappeared.

Apparently she was being searched for as a runaway, but until now there had been no word.

As if the same thing had been broadcast to everyone else, in the blink of an eye,

—‘The Headless Rider vanished that senior into the shadows,’

this ridiculous, unbelievable rumour spread throughout the school.

But those who lived in Ikebukuro knew.

That the Headless Rider did exist.

It had not been seen around for about half a year, but just seeing it once all of them felt almost the same thing.

—It’s not of this world.

A motorcycle without the sound of an engine; the rising shadow. After witnessing that firsthand no one could dismiss the urban legend of the Headless Rider as simple gossip.

Akane, who had in the past been saved by the Headless Rider, could not bear the one-sided smearing of the urban legend’s name.

But no one would believe her if she said she had been helped by the Headless Rider, and furthermore, if she were to go into the exact details, she would have to speak of her ‘family matters’.

She understood that it was a route that would not result in any happiness for anyone.

That was why she had decided to bear it in school and pretend not to hear the rumours, and, instead, clear the mystery of the disappearance herself.

Just as she had set her heart on this she happened to hear the conversation of Kuon’s group, and without thinking, spoke to defend the Headless Rider —

But as a result she attracted more interest than necessary from this unusually-dressed boy by the name of Kuon.

“So, what are you planning to do?”

“...I want to search for her, too.”

“Search for her... On your own? Really?”

“I can’t just leave it to the police...”

A dark expression, but firmly.

“You’re going so far; do you love your senior that much? Or do you just have so much confidence that the Headless Rider isn’t the culprit?”

“That...”

To Kuon, who asked this in messy Japanese, Akane averted her eyes slightly.

“Hey, hey, I won’t do anything bad, so tell us about the Headless Rider! If there’s a misunderstanding, you’ve got to clear it. And if we know it’s a misunderstanding, we can tell everyone that the Headless Rider’s a good person, too. Right?”

“...”

At Akane, who was looking at him suspiciously, the green-haired boy smiled spiritedly, but —

“Hey, you can’t go bullying younger girls.”

“Agagagagagagaga”

Once more Mairu ground at his temples with her fists from behind; Kuon cried out instinctively.

"There are things people don't want to tell anyone, so read the atmosphere. *Air-read, air-read.*"

"Ahowowow... No, but... Isn't it worrying?"

From beside him, Yahiro, who had recovered from his gloom, stepped towards Akane.

"I got it, if you don't want to talk about it, we won't ask about the Headless Rider anymore."

"...sorry."

Akane nodded her head, and perhaps she felt Yahiro more trustworthy than Kuon; she spoke just a little more about the Headless Rider.

"Anyone who's spoken to them would know... That person definitely isn't bad."

"Yeah, I believe you."

"Eh?"

"Nothing says not being human makes you evil."

Even though she felt strange at the somewhat self-deprecating smile Yahiro wore as he said this, Akane smiled, slightly cheered, as she thanked him.

"Thank you so much! I think so too! So many people misunderstand... the Headless Rider..."

And then, for just an instant a self-deprecating look crossed her face as well, as she continued.

"...about Shizuo-san, too..."

"Eh?"

"Ah, no, sorry. I was talking to myself!"

Hearing Akane, Mairu, who had stayed silent till then, clapped as if she had remembered something.

"Ah, right! The Headless Rider's close with Shizuo-san, aren't they!"

Yahiro's heart raced.

—'Shizuo'?

—'Shizuo' as in... it can't be...

Before the question could exit Yahiro's mouth in the form of words, Kuon reacted to the name.

"Geh—?! Seriously?! You mean Shizuo as in, that Shizuo?! Heiwajima Shizuo!"

"Yeah, what, you know?"

"Of course! I've heard the legends from Kuronuma-senpai, and I saw him throw a vending machine myself just once!"

Eh?! The Headless Rider knows Heiwajima Shizuo?! Seriously?"

"Aocchi didn't say a word to you about that, did he?"

Mairu said this, surprised.

Away from the conversation between the two, Yahiro, who had been gloomy up till before, began to feel exhilarated.

—Heiwajima, Shizuo.

—Throwing vending machines.

—There's no mistake!

—It's him!

When he had looked up Ikebukuro's urban legends on the internet, the name had turned up countless, countless times.

He was a person nicknamed the Automatic Fighting Doll, who, along with the Headless Rider, was called a living legend of Ikebukuro.

—To think his name would show up here!

—But why?

—Because they're fellow urban legends?

Yahiro hesitated, but then, anxiously, shook his head slightly.

—No, now's not the time to think about that.

Breathing deeply, Yahiro spoke, once more, to Akane.

"Then, I'll help you find your seniors."

"...eh?"

At this wild offer, Akane's eyes widened.

Not only Akane; Kuon beside him was staring, and Mairu was grinning as she watched the conversation, as though saying, 'Things just got interesting.'

"I want to know what kind of person the Headless Rider is. But if they're not bad, like you say, I want to prove it too. So I want to try asking those seniors who're big fans of the Headless Rider."

—Ah, I said it.

—It's okay, I didn't lie.

—...I didn't, right?

To Yahiro, it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to get closer to both the Headless Rider and Heiwajima Shizuo'.

He was worried about the missing child, and had indeed thought to help the girl called Akane, so it was technically two birds with one stone – but was it not dishonest to hide one more bird?

—No, that's irrelevant.

—And I really do want to know.

—If the Headless Rider is really a 'monster'...

—Is it possible to be a 'monster' and not be hated?

—Whatever it is, those seniors who ran away from home are the most worrying.

—It's obvious which is more important.

Even as he felt this sudden guilt, in the end Yahiro hid this motive within himself, and chose to honestly help in the search.

He felt this was surely the right thing to do socially; but still he had not an ounce of confidence.

"..."

At Yahiro's offer, Akane glanced at Mairu.

Her gaze sought an opinion on Yahiro, who she had just met and whose personality she did not know.

In response, Mairu gave her a thumbs-up, and said,

"Isn't that great? Kuru-nee and I'll help too!"

And just like that, she turned her thumbs-up towards Kuon.

"Kuon-kun, you'll ask Aocchi and the rest, won't you!"

Kuon himself was the one surprised by this.

"Eh, wait, does that mean I'm helping too? And you're dragging Kuronuma-senpai in?"

"I'm not forcing you, you know? But hey, but, see? At a time like this, you're not the kind of person to say, 'Normal civilians like us shouldn't act rashly about this. Leave it to the police,' or, 'Why do I have to go to this kind of trouble,' are you?"

Mairu's eyes and her words conveyed, implicitly, to Kuon:

—‘*You should love sticking your nose into into this kind of trouble.*’

A single statement that saw through **one part** of Kuon’s true nature.

Kuon smiled, twitching, and shook his head at the girl who was his senior both at the dojo and in school.

“We’ve only met a few times; you’re saying that very confidently.”

“It was our older brother’s forte~. Maybe it’s in the blood.”

Mairu, laughing, said as though to comfort Akane:

“Well, it’s all right. They must have left home because of their rebellious phase or something; we’ll find them just fine.”

“But...”

To Akane, who was looking around at their faces worriedly, Mairu rambled on airily.

“Ah, if you’re thinking, ‘It might be a bother...’ to us, worry about that later, later! They and I, all of us are following our own ambitions and desires to say, ‘We’ll do it,’ knowing full well we might meet danger, so Akane-chan, don’t always rely on what older people are doing!”

As Mairu said this brightly, Kuon interrupted unthinkingly:

“No, I don’t really have an ulterior motive...”

Mairu crooked her lip into a smile, and replied:

“So, you’ll pull out? I can be the one to ask Aocchi.”

“...no, I’ll do it. I’ve committed already, after all.”

Seeing Kuon sigh and smile, Akane, after a moment of thought —

As if she had reached some kind of compromise in her heart, with determination in her eye, she bowed her head.

“Thank you so much... I’ll be counting on you.”

And, gripping her octagonal staff tightly, she said,

“But... if anything feels dangerous, please stop right away. I just want everyone to stay safe...”

Kuon, as if teasing Akane, shrugged.

“Oh no oh no, oh no no no, no matter how you look the one in most danger here would be Akane-chan, the youngest, wouldn’t it?”

“Kuon-kun, it’s best not to underestimate Akane-chan, hm~? She might be a girl just into middle school, but she’s a star of hope of Rakuei’s staff technique, you know?”

“Serious?! I see~, then the one who should be most careful here might be Yahiro-kun, huh.”

Speaking lightly, Kuon patted Yahiro’s back.

“Y, yeah. I’ll take care.”

Yahiro nodded, an awkward smile on his face, and asked Akane, as if to change the topic,

“Um... By the way, er, what’s the name of the one who disappeared?”

Akane took a deep breath, and spoke the name clearly.

“It was Tatsugami... Tatsugami Ai-senpai.”

“Eh?”

Tatsugami.

It was a familiar name.

It was a unique surname, but although he tried to consider that it might be common in the region of Ikebukuro, it seemed natural to think the following:

That there was some relation to the Tatsugami he knew.

Apparently Yahiro was not the only one who thought this; Kuon said, slightly puzzled.

“Tatsugami... wasn’t there one in our class? Are they related somehow?”

Kuon asked this, but Yahiro had no answer at all.

“Yeah... That might be, though we can’t say anything yet.”

A girl who was a big fan of the Headless Rider had the name of Tatsugami as well.

It would be stranger to think there was no link.

The ‘warning’ from his classmate repeated again and again in Yahiro’s chest.

—*‘Don’t get too involved with the Headless Rider.’*

He was being dragged into ‘something’.

Yahiro, who was more timid than most, felt a premonition close to certainty.

But it was too late to stop this.

Fighting the uneasiness swirling in his chest, the cowardly boy set on moving forward.



Afterward, after finishing his observation of the training Kuon and the rest had, Yahiro accepted a pamphlet and returned home.

Kuon and Akane finished practice and went home next, leaving Mairu alone to wait in the lounge for her sister to fetch her.

“I’ve to tell Kuru-nee as soon as possible too~. That tomorrow’ll be the start of the missing persons search of the Secret Society of Hot-Blooded Cold-Blooded Ikebukuro Detectives Society. Ah, I said Society twice. Ah whatever.”

Mairu was swinging her legs on a chair in the lounge, voicing a name to the group that she had come up with on her own excited whim, when a voice called out to her from the corridor.

“Oi, Mairu.”

“Ah, Mikage-*shihandai*! Thank you for today!”

(**Shihandai* – assistant instructor.)

Sharaku Mikage.

She was the daughter of the director of Rakuei Gym, a female assistant instructor recognisable by her sporty appearance.

She was an acquaintance from when Mairu had first joined, and rather than a teacher-student relationship she was a conversation partner, like a friend with an age gap.

This person brought up a question to Mairu:

“Hey, Mairu, were those high school boys with you earlier your friends?”

“Ah, Kuon-kun and Mizuchi-kun? Yeah, they’re my juniors from Raira. Apparently they had their entrance ceremony today.”

“Fu~n... What did you do?”

“Eh? Kuon-kun’s been a Rakuei student since before, did you know? He says he was attending the Takadanobaba branch. What’s that, Mikage-san! Could it be you see some high hopes?! Could he be like Kisa-senpai, on par to become the next Traugott?!”

(T/N: I never finished reading *Otsuberu to Warau Suiyobi*, but the male protagonist is Kisa Yukihiro; they share a surname.)

Mairu, who had not personally seen Kuon training, asked Mikage in turn, thrilled.

But Mikage shook her head calmly.

"Kuon was the green-haired one, right? Well, he was using our style. So I could tell he was a student..."

There Mikage stopped, and after some thought, said to Mairu.

"The one who came to see, he's Mizuchi-kun?"

"Yeah. But... what about him? Ah, could it be he's your type, Mikage-san?"

"Ridiculous, it's not that. ...That kid, has he trained before?"

"Hm~? I'm not sure. I didn't ask, and I think Kuon-kun would've said something if he knew..."

Mairu had not imagined Mikage would express more interest in Yahiro, who had merely come to watch; she asked again,

"But what about him? He seemed like a quiet kid, Mikage-san."

"Did you see his hands, Mairu?"

"His hands? Mm~, speaking of which, I didn't. What happened to his hands?"

Mikage thought even more, and then, heaving a small sigh, warned Mairu.

"What I'm about to say now – don't ever say it to his face, or spread it to other people. You'll surely tell Kururi-chan, so only her. No one else. Can you keep it a secret?"

The assistant instructor spoke with an unusually serious tone, and Mairu stopped swinging her legs, and, still smiling, nodded.

"I got it. I promise."

"Thanks. I would be sorry to him if rumours started."

Mikage inserted a coin into the vending machine in the lounge, and pressed the button for an amino acid sports drink as she spoke.

"He was watching very seriously in seiza, so I caught a glance of his hands on his knees..."

Retrieving her drink from the vending machine, Mikage recalled the scene in her head.

"His hands were full of scars."

"Scars?"

It was true that if one trained with a training post, wounding their hands would be common.

But Mairu did not understand why that would be reason to be so secretive.

"But if it was just scars, maybe he has a cat and just got bitten or something?"

"...yeah, maybe."

Mikage nodded at Mairu's words.

"Those were teeth marks, sure. But they certainly weren't a cat's."

"Eh?"

"I know because I've experienced it myself..."

As Mairu saw Mikage's hand gripping the drink can as she spoke, she noticed.

That on her hand there were numerous ones different from the usual training scars.

"Those were marks from human teeth."

"...so he was bitten by someone?"

Mairu tilted her head. Mikage shook her head.

"When you punch someone's teeth out, sometimes the broken teeth pierce into your fists."

“...”

“If, after they’re broken, you keep punching the person’s face over and over, you’ll get scratched up even more. You might get infected, so it’s not something I recommend. There are plenty of easier ways to inflict that level of damage.” After saying this, Mikage remembered, clearly, Yahiro’s ‘hands’, and, with complicated feelings, spoke an ‘answer’ to Mairu’s question expressionlessly.

“The scars on that Mizuchi-kun’s hands... those were definitely scars from broken teeth, from humans.”

“...really?”

“That many scars... I wonder just how many people’s teeth he punched out.”

Mikage took a sip of her drink, and smiling faintly, murmured to herself.

“I shivered, just a little.”



Takadanobaba. Kuon’s apartment.

“I’m home.”

The one who said this was Kotonami Kuon, who, having returned home, first headed toward his older sister’s room inside.

Beside the door cardboard boxes from mail orders were piled up to nearly the ceiling, the opened and unopened separated into stacks.

On the part of the floor visible between countless stacks was a cumulation of emptied bowls and plates, with chopsticks placed politely on them.

“Oh, Nee-chan, you ate everything today.”

Kuon murmured this as he picked up the crockery, but it was not directed towards someone in the room.

“Honestly; you use the shower just fine, but you hate coming out to eat~. I don’t get your criteria.”

Grumbling to himself, he moved the crockery to the sink.

Other than the area in front of his sister’s room, the rest of the apartment was tidy; there was not even mould around the sink.

After washing the dishes thoroughly, Kuon sat on the sofa in the living room, and opened the notebook computer on the table.

And turning on the TV, he slid his thumb over the screen of his smartphone with his free hand.

“Now...”

While watching a night news programme on the television, Kuon put the smartphone to his ear.

“Thanks for the hard work~”

‘_____’

“I know, I have information, so I called.”

Kuon grinned at the person on the other side of the call, and spoke of the day’s ‘results’.

“Yeah, the entrance ceremony went smoothly. I was the wildest one by appearance. Looks like Raira Academy has lots of model students.”

‘_____’

“Some other things happened today. I found some interesting pawns.”

Unlike the false smile he had presented to the others in the afternoon, Kuon wore a smile that felt somehow cold.

“Can you believe it? Someone came over from Akita just for the Headless Rider!”

‘_____’

“No, it’s true! Yeah? It’s exactly what we’ve been looking for, isn’t it? He looks like a nice guy type, the kind you can get anything out of. I even thought we should be friends.”

‘_____’

“It was a joke. Do I look friendly to you?”

At what the other party said, Kuon shrugged unconsciously.

“He’s called Mizuchi Yahiro... He has quite some **potential**.”

Kuon remembered the face of the ‘pawn’ he had just met today, and said, narrowing his eyes like a snake:

“Just by travelling with him, I got plenty of other returns.”



Rakuei Gym.

After she finished speaking about Yahiro, Mikage, as though she had just remembered something, asked about another student.

“By the way, how’s that kid Kuon? He was practising seriously, but... If my brother or my father saw the colour of his hair, they might demand that he dye it black. Everyone’s surprisingly old-fashioned.”

“Yeah~. Though it’s interesting so I’d prefer it to stay green~”

At Mikage’s question, Mairu thought for a while, and answered straightforwardly:

“Well, maybe you’d say he’s a bad guy~. The type to use people instead of acting himself. Even attending this dojo seriously is to learn the very basics of self-defence at least, probably. For when it’s necessary. ...ah, speaking of that made me remember – I feel he’s the same type as Iza-nii.”

Remembering that face she missed, Mikage sighed slightly.

“...if he’s like your brother, then he’s not a bad guy, he’s a scoundrel.”

“He said they were friends, but I think he’s simply using him, you know? Because Mizuchi-kun looks like a nice guy. Though I don’t know yet what exactly he plans to use him for.”

“...well, Mairu, you talk very friendly about that kind of guy yourself.”

After, Mairu told Mikage of what they had spoken of today.

And hearing of Akane’s issue, Mikage smiled.

“Oh? So then you decided to look for Akane-chan’s seniors.”

“Yeah, it’d be nice if we could find them safely...”

“But those high school students shouldn’t mess with Akane-chan. They probably don’t know about her family.”

To Mikage, who was disposing of her can into a bin as she said this, Mairu disagreed.

“Mizuchi-kun probably doesn’t, but I wonder about Kuon.”

“?”

"If he's with Aocchi, then I'd think he definitely knows about the Awakusu-kai~."

♂♀

Kuon's apartment.

"Yeah, Awakusu Akane. The granddaughter of the head of the Awakusu-kai!"

'_____,'

"It's funny, isn't it? That the little miss of the Awakusu-kai would have some connection with the Headless Rider."

With an expression he would never have worn before Akane, Kuon spoke cheerfully to the person across the line.

"Well, I didn't know what to think when Yahiro offered to help with the search, but things turned interesting. The name of Awakusu Akane's senior who went missing... 'Tatsugami Ai'..."

'_____, _____?'

"Yeah, there's no way they're unconnected. The magazine reporter that disappeared recently was Tatsugami Aya, wasn't it?"

'_____,'

To what the other party said, Kuon nodded.

"Yeah, it'd help if you could look into that. I don't have any connections with publishers, after all. Also, it might be a coincidence, but... There's someone called Tatsugami in my class too. She feels a bit unsocial, but she's a rather cute girl."

'_____,'

"No way, it's not like that. Well, if they're related it'd be a big one. Well, it's something to be careful with, but at worst it'll be a big task, up to ten million... If there's a competitor, it's be Kuronuma-senpai, maybe. That person knows everything of what I'm doing."

At that point, Kuon instead raised a question to the person across the line.

"So, how are you? Did anything interesting happen?"

'_____,'

"Mm... Wait a minute! Who got out of jail? Someone big? The Dollars? Or the Yellow Scarves? Eh? Blue Square?"

As though a snake that had found its prey, Kuon's eyes glittered.

But that shine in his eyes faded in the next moment.

'_____,'

"Horada... ex-member of Blue Square and then the Yellow Scarves...?"

'_____,'

"I see... So he just came out... That Horada... Horada, Horada..."

Tilting his expressionless face slightly, Kuon asked, blandly, a simple question.

"...sorry, who?"

Interlude: Rumours on the Internet ②

Interlude: Rumours on the Internet ②

Ikebukuro Information Site, *IkeNEW! Version IKEBUKURO*

Popular article, *'Announcement – revival of an urban legend': Looks like the Headless Rider's the culprit behind the serial disappearances in Ikebukuro!*

'Where did the Headless Rider go?' – (Extract from Baboo Daily Digital Edition)

Has the darkness of Ikebukuro finally shown its face?

Events that suggest this have shaken Tokyo as of late.

From December last year, there have been consecutive disappearances of young people in the vicinity of Ikebukuro, and in the shadow of those disappearances whispered rumours of the 'Headless Rider' have begun to show up.

There is a group with one similarity amongst the missing persons and runaways.

And that similarity is undoubtedly that they were 'seeking the Headless Rider's true identity'.

The 'Headless Rider', a mysterious presence that has shown itself countless times in the past twenty years.

A motorcycle without the sound of an engine, that can transform into a headless horse.

A motorist that emits shadow from its body, and controls it with ease.

It is a presence that one could only call an urban legend, but up till at least half a year ago, it was a being residents of the city could easily capture in video even with their handphones.

Since the sharp drop in sightings, young fanatic 'believers' of the 'Headless Rider' –

Have each disappeared, right after telling those around them that they 'might be able to meet the Headless Rider'.

And furthermore last month, a reporter from a certain information magazine, who had been researching into the Headless Rider, disappeared, leaving only a statement that she was 'going to meet a powerful information source'.

(Omitted)

Also, there are rumours of the Headless Rider's connection with the local violence organisations; the police are looking in that direction for potential suspects.

(Further content omitted)

[-\(Click here for the full article\)](#)

IkeNEW! Administrator's Comment

"If you think they're gone they'll be vanished-nari.

Praying that the missing people are found safe.”

Administrator *Lila Tailtooth Zaiya*



Excerpts of typical tweets from microblogging site *Twittia*.

The Headless Rider had a bounty once, didn't it. Quite sure back then the bounty was withdrawn right after. Thinking about it that was strange. I think there was a secret dealing with the government.

- Quite sure the police got mad at the person who put out the bounty.
 - It's common sense the police would be angry, so they should have put the bounty out expecting that, right? Taking it down right after is strange.

Don't underestimate Max Sandshield's randomness.

It's really bad, someone from my university went missing too. Apparently they've been saying they love the Headless Rider since they were a kid. It's really bad. Was sort of grossed. Maybe it's better they're gone. Disgusting.

- Isn't it imprudent to say that someone who's gone missing was gross or disgusting or whatnot?
 - Huh? It's my own freedom. Don't pick on everything it's irritating. Who're you.

Aren't you the irritating one? It's my freedom to pick on things too.

If it pisses you off don't look at it die idio~t. Die die die die.

- You've posted before that you went drink driving, haven't you. And cheating on exams too, I'll be reporting this, Raira University First Year-san.

I apologise it was all a joke. Being a Raira University student was a joke too. Contacting the school might cause trouble for them so please stop.

※ (The poster was expelled from Raira University subsequently, and is under probation for other complaints)

Apparently the magazine reporter said before disappearing that she was going to meet a powerful information source, but who would be able to provide information on the Headless Rider?

- I've seen someone wearing white riding behind them.
 - There's a rumour that that's an underground doctor.
- Heiwajima Shizuo, wouldn't it be? Since they're together a lot.
 - So maybe, provoke Shizuo→get thrown far away→go missing?

Seriously?

Wasn't there was an informant talking with the Headless Rider now and then?

- Informant lol
- No, there really was! Don't be like that.

That guy with the black fur jacket, right? Haven't seen him recently, hm.



二章

Chapter 3A

The Destroyer

There was a demon in Ikebukuro.

Anyone who had stayed in the city for a fair amount of time would be familiar with this rumour.

Those who commuted daily to the commercial district near the train station would know it was not just a rumour.

Guard rails ripped from the pavement.

Uprooted streetlights.

Broken road signs.

Crushed vending machines.

These disconcerting parts and pieces, when sighted, could only be the result of a single human being.

Heiwajima Shizuo.

He was a man whose most notable features were the bartender uniform he wore regularly, and his striking blond-dyed hair and sunglasses.

He worked a job of collecting overdue debts from the customers of telekura, online dating sites, cabaret clubs and the like, and was commonly seen in Ikebukuro's commercial district, especially around Sunshine Street and 60-Storey Street.

If that were all, he would be no more than a man who worked a somewhat grey-area job; yet there was no question that he was the best-matched for the title of 'Strongest' in Ikebukuro, childish as the term was.

If one were to cite the rumours surrounding Heiwajima Shizuo, there would be too many to count:

They said he swung a vending machine around with one hand.

They said he ripped a guard rail off the pavement with one hand.

They said he sawed through a car using a road sign.

They said he stood up just fine even after being hit by a garbage truck.

They said he had lifted a refrigerator when he was in elementary school.

They said he had once tamed a tiger.

They said he liked vanilla milkshakes.

They said he had acquired a Russian assassin as a lackey.

They said a knife could not stab further than one millimeter into him.

They said a bullet failed to pierce his muscle.

They said he liked cream anmitsu.

They said he had once destroyed a building.

They said he chased some bosozoku away swinging a streetlight around.

They said he was hit with a metal pipe and the pipe was the one dented.

They said only a ballpoint pen from Nebula could pierce his muscle.

They said he had kicked a car around like a football.
They said he gripped a lump of coal so tight the pressure turned it into diamond.
They said he liked creme caramel.
They said apparently the prominent actor Hanejima Yuuhei was his younger brother.
They said he threw a person higher than a building.
They said he liked pancakes with a lot of syrup.
They said he just liked sweet things.

There was no way to tell which of these rumours were true and which were exaggerated, but they were legends anyone who knew of Shizuo could imagine to be true.
Some theorised that the abrupt cease of action from the serial slasher that had once plunged Ikebukuro into the pit of terror was due to Shizuo retaliating when he was attacked.
There were videos of him actually throwing vending machines and waving streetlights around on the internet, but most who had not seen it in real life would simply comment that those were well-done graphics.
It was true that he was the older brother of the popular actor Hanejima Yuhei, but even if there was video proof, perhaps it would be too easy to think something so unbelievable was faked by the TV station.
But even amongst rumours like these, as of late something had caught particular interest and was surfacing in gossip.

They said Heiwajima Shizuo was a friend of the Headless Rider.

This was not a baseless rumour tying the two together simply due to their common status as urban legends.
Heiwajima Shizuo had been witnessed going around with the Headless Rider countless times.
Like seeing a famous football player and a famous baseball player laughing together on the street, to those who knew the stories surrounding each of them, these fellow legends' bond was a shocking image carved into memory.

And now that the Headless Rider had vanished from the city –
A turning point made its way to this other 'living legend'.



Evening. A certain parlour in Ikebukuro.

It was a fruit parlour in a department store in Ikebukuro.
Many of the customers were female, but there were also male customers who seemed to have just ended work.
Amongst them were two who did not appear to be salarymen.
One was a man in a bartender's uniform, eating a gorgeous parfait with mangoes sliced into rosettes; the other was a man with dreadlocks, having a panini with seasonal vegetables on the side.
"So, you said you wanted a qualification?"
The man with dreadlocks – Tanaka Tom – replied, as the hand he was eating the panini with came to a rest.

Following, the man in the bartender uniform – Heiwajima Shizuo – continued on the topic.

“Yeah; Tom-san, you have many qualifications, right? Like, what...”

“Ahhh... I have... First would be the estate agent cert, and then, well, I only got up to the 2nd grade for both, but there’s the Kanji and English proficiency tests. And then there’s the one for land surveying, journalism, and I’ve the 3rd grade for the clerical skills test...”

Tom continued listing numerous qualifications, as Shizuo looked on him respectfully.

“Wow... That’s amazing.”

They had just completed their work quota for the day; the sun had already set outside.

Normally they would return to the office to report and then go on their separate ways, but Shizuo had said he had something to discuss, and seeing as they were peckish they had ended up in this store.

“Nah, it’s nothing – I just thought getting some qualifications might save me from going jobless... If it weren’t for this job I might have gotten more.”

“Are there any useful ones I might be able to get?”

“That’s sudden of you. Are you thinking of changing jobs?”

As Shizuo had never before said anything about this, Tom asked out of confusion.

“Ah, no; I’m satisfied with this job, and I’m not thinking of changing... But I mean. I just kind of want to be strong at something that can give me confidence, or something...”

“...”

Heiwajima Shizuo possessed monstrous strength and durability beyond human limits.

His superior Tom knew this as well as anyone else.

But he did not say, ‘Isn’t that superstrength of yours more than enough?’

Because he knew there was no way Shizuo himself would have any liking for such a violent strength.

“Mm, I see. It’s not like our company’s very legal, either, so it wouldn’t be surprising for it to just up and vanish someday.”

There Tom began to run through some ideas in his head.

“Hmm... There are plenty of qualifications to go for, but a lot of them require job experience... Wait a minute.”

Tom took out his smartphone and began to browse for information on the internet.

“There are quite some qualifications you can go for on your own – jewellery coordinator, park warden, all sorts... Oh, there’s even a test for world heritage?”

“I’m not very familiar with world heritage...”

“Well, it’s normal to start off getting a qualification by thinking you want to do something. Do you have anything you want to do outside of your current job?”

Tom asked this frankly, and Shizuo thought for a moment before he replied.

“If I had a clear idea it would narrow things down a bit, wouldn’t it? But I still can’t see anything I want to do in the future.”

“Then let’s not talk about the present; how about when you were a kid?”

“Eh?”

“At a time like this it’s important to go back to your roots too, you know. Surely when you were a kid you had one or two dreams for the future.”

As Tom said this to him, Shizuo began to think once more.

–A dream – my dream?

–Right, I had something like that.

After thinking for a few more seconds, Shizuo remembered what he had written for his elementary school graduation anthology.

“Yeah... Right, that was it.”

“Did you remember?”

Shizuo, reminiscing, nodded fiercely as he replied.

“I think I wanted to be a detective.”

“...I see.”

A detective.

Whether it suited Shizuo was complicated to think of.

Tom thought.

That it was a dream from elementary school suggested that Shizuo's aspiration had not been the investigation of extramarital affairs and such real life detectives did, but rather the job of detectives in movies and comics.

But even fictional detectives had all sorts.

Those who used logical reasoning to track down murderers or other criminals – the brainy type.

And those who did their job dutifully and collected evidence, fighting off the occasional attack from the enemy – the fighter type.

There were also hybrid types like Sherlock Holmes; no matter that he had brought up detectives – there was no singular image things could be narrowed down to.

If it were a fighter-type detective like in a movie, there would be no occupation more befitting of Shizuo, but sadly enough they were not living in a world of movies. Tom could not imagine a Shizuo that went around carrying out duties like doing background checks and patting people down.

–It would be interesting if he had a brainy-type companion...

–The brainy type, huh.

Tom ran through all of the people he knew who seemed smart.

As he did so, a certain informant's face came to mind, and he quickly erased the image.

–...No way, that's the one guy that just can't do.

–I can't even picture them standing next to one another peacefully.

–They're not at a level where they can be foils to each other like in a movie; more like one where just seeing each other's face has them trying to kill one another...

–Speaking of which, that guy's really vanished from the city.

While Tom was thinking such things, Shizuo, as if having come to terms with things on his own, began to nod.

“Yeah... I see – that's it, Tom-san. Staying with this job for so long, somehow, it might be because it's like the image of the detective I wanted to be as a kid.”

“Eh?”

At this, Tom thought back on Shizuo and the job they had done up till now.

Searching for people who had disappeared while holding onto a debt, occasionally battling with debtors who turned on them and attacked.

As he remembered this cycle of events, Tom smiled bitterly and shook his head.

"I don't need to be reminded again of just how hazardous this job is..."



30 minutes later. Ikebukuro West Gate Park.

As the two were on their way back to report at the office, Tom spoke up again.

"It's quite rare to hear you talk about things like that."

Shizuo, with an expression quieter than usual, replied.

"I mean... I was thinking that it's about time for me to change, too..."

"Huh?"

"It must have been Raira Academy's entrance ceremony today. I saw lots of new students, with this shine in their eye."

"Yeah, there were a lot of them in uniform today."

Tom said this, looking around the park.

Of course, there were very few in uniform here at this time of day, but there were plenty of young people gathered in the park.

There were all kinds from the honest sort to those who with the air they gave off could only be delinquents, but unlike a few years ago when colour gangs were still rampant, now there was no trace of them at all.

Shizuo gazed at this scene himself, and said, emotionally:

"Now the flea is gone I feel like the city's really quietened down. When I think of how it's been like this for more than a year, somehow I feel like I need to up my game, too..."

"Yeah. Those twins are still as noisy as always, though."

"Well, they being themselves isn't causing trouble for anyone."

Just as they said this, they spotted one half of the twins they were speaking of.

"Oh, speak of the devil. The other younger one's still at Rakuei Gym?"

Tom said this, and looked towards the girl in question, Orihara Kururi –
Something was odd.

A group of delinquents were gathered in front of her and looked like they were up to no good; rather than flirting, it looked more like they were trying to force her to follow them.

"Hey, I thought there were less idiots like that around recently."

Ignoring Tom, who said this wearily, Shizuo was already walking towards them.

"Ah, wait, Shizuo..."

"That's why I'm saying, come couple up with all of us."

"We're celebrating for our senpai who just got out of jail, see? A party's not complete without a pretty girl, right?"

"You look exactly like our senpai's type."

The punks said this as they surrounded Kururi.

Kururi heaved a small sigh, and although her voice was soft, she expressed herself firmly.

I'd rather not

"...no..."

"As I said, you can't say no."

"We could force you into a car and hurt you or we could enjoy ourselves together – you know the better deal for you, right? Right?"

Behind them was a man with his back to them, sitting on a post.

He was probably their 'senpai' who had just got out of jail.

At this point, another man's voice addressed them.

"Oi, stop it."

"Huh? What's wrong with you. Where'd a bartender come from?"

They glared with plain disgust at the man in the bartender suit who had suddenly appeared.

"I know this girl. Won't you let her off?"

The delinquents, whose threatening glares had failed them, acted rashly in their anger.

"Being the hero isn't cool, idiot."

One of them doused the man in the bartender suit with the plastic bottle in his hand.

And with that everyone surrounding them understood that these punks were not local.

Because if they were anyone staying in Ikebukuro, they would have known just how dangerous an act that had been.

The orange juice dripping from the plastic bottle soaked through the hair and clothes of the man who had come between them.

At the sight of this, Kururi quietly shrunk back, and the man with dreadlocks who had been watching from a distance, after frowning, put his hands together with pity in his eyes.

Still unaware of what they had done, one of the delinquents cried out to the senpai who had just returned from prison behind them.

"Horada-san! Horada-san! We can deal this shitty bastard one, can't we!"

And then, the man named Horada stood slowly, and spoke.



"Ah, it can't be helped, I don't wanna go back in right after coming out. Just break his arms and legs, don't do anything fatal..."

At that point Horada turned towards them, and saw the face of the man standing there.

At the same time, time stopped for him completely.

"_____"

"? Horada-san?"

Horada was gaping, his face pale as a sheet.

Right after the delinquents called out to him –

The man in the bartender suit gripped one of their faces in his hand with a crack.

"Hey... Did you know?"

"?! ?! ?!"

At the sudden restriction and pain, the delinquent flailed his limbs about.

It was as if a giant vise was clamping down on his face.

To the delinquents, who still failed to understand what was happening, the man in the bartender suit said:

"Humans... die easily, you know... It's possible that, by the shock of being splashed from a plastic bottle, someone would suffer myocardial infarction and die, right?"

"Gah... Gogah..."

"Y, you! Hey, what the hell are you doing!"

The other delinquents began to tug at the man, but as though he was a giant tree with roots dug into the ground, he was immovable.

"In other words, you just tried to kill me, didn't you...?"

"Th, this guy, what's he saying..."

The panicking delinquents looked towards Horada as one –

His legs were shaking, and trembling violently, he tried to escape.

"H... H... Heiwajima..."

Behind him rang out the roar of the man in the bartender suit, Heiwajima Shizuo.

"In other words... Even if I kill you you can't say a thing, haaaaaaargh!"

Then the delinquent whose face was in his hand was thrown hard, and sent flying into Horada's back.

"Gohii?!"

Seeing the tragic scene that followed, Tom sighed and murmured to himself.

"Well, if it were him from the past, he would've beaten them up the moment Kururi was involved..."

As he looked on at the delinquents getting beaten up one by one, and the man who had come out of prison trying to crawl away, Tom shrugged and continued.

"Maybe he's grown, just a little."

Chapter 3B

The Challenger

The next day. Raira Academy.

Classes were not yet in session on the second day of Raira Academy's new year.

Today was mainly for the tour of the facilities, and orientation to introduce the committees and clubs. The appointment of committee members for each class was also carried out.

Up till a few years ago committee members were settled on the first day, but the school's administration had taken a shift in direction to organise explanatory sessions for the committees also, and now it was postponed to the second day.

Yahiro had nominated himself to be the library rep, and as there were no other candidates, he was accepted uneventfully.

During the first session of committee activities after school there had been self-introductions followed by the selection of president and vice-president of each committee, and settling the scope of activities for the future as well as the rotation for the library's watch duty.

By the time it had all ended the sun was already setting, and when Yahiro returned to the classroom the stretch of sky outside the windows was dyed red.

And Yahiro saw a familiar girl in a corner of the classroom.

"You couldn't have been... waiting for me?"

"Well, I didn't have much to do anyway."

Answering shortly, Tatsugami Himeka asked Yahiro coolly:

"How was the library committee?"

"Ah, I was nervous, but everyone was nice. The committee president seemed kind, too."

"The committee president, as in, the senior with the glasses and that cool vibe?"

"Yeah, that's him."

After that casual exchange, Himeka, her tone unchanging, asked coolly again:

"Mm—that is."

"What?"

"What's your plan? Will we be continuing the conversation from yesterday?"

"Wasn't that why you waited for me?"

Yahiro tilted his head and answered promptly, without a hint of irony; and to this Himeka sighed lightly.

"You're kind of weird, after all."

"Really...? I'll be careful. Thank you."

"I don't think that's something you should thank me for..."

Himeka tilted her head, still expressionless, but she did not ask further, and quickly returned to the root issue.

"Then, is it all right if you start? Why are you after the Headless Rider?"

"...yeah. Right."

After a short interval, Yahiro began to speak, quietly.

"You see. I want to be sure. Whether I'm a normal human, or... a monster."

"Eh?"

"You see, I was called a monster back in my hometown, and I haven't had friends since elementary school. The only ones who actively involved themselves with me were scary people who just randomly came to beat me up."

"..."

Himeka appeared to be hesitant, but did not interrupt, and continued to listen silently to Yahiro.

"But at that point in time, someone who came to visit the village's hot springs said something to me: 'You're not a monster, you're a regular human'... He taught me that there was a world I didn't know about in the city of Ikebukuro."

"...and then you came to Ikebukuro?"

"Yeah; I wanted to see a bigger world. I always thought I was a hopeless person, but if there are people in Tokyo unusual enough to overshadow even me, still living their lives as usual..."

Smiling somewhat uncomfortably, Yahiro spoke his honest emotions.

"If I were able to see it with my own eyes, I thought I might be able to face myself differently. That's why I came to Ikebukuro."

"..."

Hearing what he said, Himeka fell into thought.

What he had said was strange.

But he did not seem to be lying.

Yahiro had said he was called a monster, but nothing of his appearance seemed to warrant this, and although she felt his personality a little strange, it did not seem possible that that alone could make him an outcast.

One might dare say he must have had undergone tremendous bullying.

Cruel bullying where he was treated as unhuman, and stoned by everyone.

Himeka's thinking this was because she had noticed the scars on the back of Yahiro's hands.

The strange scars on the back of his hands must have been a result of that bullying.

Thinking this, Himeka chose to believe what Yahiro said for now.

The question of why he would go so far as to want to meet Heiwajima Shizuo still lurked, but Himeka could at least accept that the boy before her was worth the conversation.

"...All right. I understand why you want to meet the Headless Rider."

"I see, that's great. I thought you might not believe me."

To Yahiro, who said this as though relieved, Himeka, after a brief silence, spoke herself.

"But as I said... you shouldn't chase after the Headless Rider, and you shouldn't be too taken with it."

"The reason behind that... can you tell me that, today?"

Perhaps he did not want to push the matter; despite the fact that he had already spoken of his own secret, Yahiro phrased it as a question.

And Himeka spoke.

"I have an older and a younger sister. I'm the middle of three girls."

"Mm."

"My older sister was a magazine reporter, and she always chased after the Headless Rider at work. The younger one in her own way had been squealing over the Headless Rider from when she was younger. She was air-headed in the first place—I felt that was why she was so obsessed over it, since it seems like something out of a comic."

Saying this, Himeka stopped talking for a while.

And finally, as though to prepare herself, she took a deep breath, and spoke.

"Both of them... went missing. On the same day."

"..."

"Both of them had been excited since that morning. They said that they were going to meet the Headless Rider's **lover**... That my younger sister would definitely be following the older to the interview... And just like that, both of them vanished."

Himeka's voice remained calm to the end; it was as if she was speaking of strangers.

"I thought they must have gotten into some trouble. But... it wasn't just my sisters. The police had always found the Headless Rider somewhat strange. When they investigated, it turned out there were other people, too."

"Other people... who went missing?"

"Yeah. From what I know, seven. That's why I think there must be many more."

"..."

This time it was Yahiro who went silent.

It was the first he was hearing of her older sister, but what had happened with her younger sister rang a bell.

But as he considered if it would be good to mention it now, or if it would only dig deeper into her emotional pain, Yahiro could not bring himself to bring up the name immediately.

—But.

—If I keep mum, it feels bad, like I'm cheating her.

With this in mind, Yahiro asked Himeka, nervously:

"Could it be that... your sister is Tatsugami Ai-san?"

"!"

The answer to that was clear from her reaction without her saying anything.

"Why... do you know her name?"

"Mm... A middle school girl I met yesterday... She said her senior had disappeared. That senior's name was Tatsugami Ai-san, so I thought it might be."

"I see... That's true. Even if you don't go looking for the Headless Rider, you'll come to hear things like that."

"Um, I'm sorry, kind of."

Yahiro bowed his head quickly, and made as to continue, but —

"What you're doing~?"

Just then, an intruder appeared in the classroom.

It was their frivolous, green-haired classmate.

"Er..."

"What's up, Kotonami-kun."

Yahiro spoke his name in place of Himeka, who seemed to have forgotten it.

"What's with you, you're so cold. Didn't I say just Kuon was fine?"

At Kuon, who behaved brightly on the surface, Himeka narrowed her eyes.

Noticing this, Yahiro stepped in to introduce Kuon.

"Ah, he showed me around at the martial arts gym. What I said happened just before that."

Then Kuon registered what he had said.

"Ah, you mean what we heard from Akane-chan yesterday? The girl we were curious about because she had the same name?"

"Ah, yeah. Well."

"Hey hey hey, no matter what, who would go straight up to her and ask about it?"

Kuon shrugged exasperatedly, and Yahiro said anxiously to Himeka:

"Kuon heard yesterday, too... We ended up agreeing to help find that girl's middle school senior... But see, your surnames were the same, so we were bothered."

After staring at Yahiro, who had blurted this quickly, Himeka sighed softly.

"Don't do things like that on your own... I would say, but neither you nor that girl know about my situation, or anything, so that would be unreasonable."

"Ah... No, I'm sorry."

"No. I should be the one apologising. You shouldn't have had to worry about that, sorry."

Seeing her shake her head expressionlessly, Yahiro felt even more tortured by guilt.

There was no way she could be calm when her family had just disappeared.

She had probably closed off her heart entirely, and that that was why she showed so little emotion.

Unconcerned with Yahiro, who had averted his eyes as he thought this, Himeka said to the two of them, promptly:

"I would say this to Kotonami-kun too..."

"Ah, just Kuon is fine. I'll call you Himeka too."

"I'm sorry, Kotonami-kun, but I won't like that."

"Oh my."

Despite the interruption Himeka continued, her tone undiminished in the slightest.

"Both my older and younger sisters got involved with the Headless Rider and disappeared."

"Huh? Your older sister too?!"

—?

—What's this...

In that moment Yahiro felt a flash of uneasiness at how Kuon was surprised, but unable to identify its source, he let it pass.

"Yes; I've told Yahiro-kun the details, so ask him later."

"Wait a minute, you're calling Yahiro by his name? Even though you rejected me?!"

"? Yahiro-kun's easier to say than Mizuchi-kun, anyway. And what I wouldn't like would be you calling me by name..."

"Eh? Do I sense some dislike?"

Listening to the conversation between the two, Yahiro somehow identified what felt out of place.

—Ah, I know.

—I mean... The way Kuon talks, it's, that.

—It's **forced**. On the whole.

He appeared to be hiding his true self.

Thinking this, Yahiro anxiously shook his head mentally.

—Idiot, it's not good to judge.

—It's possible everyone in Tokyo's like this, too...

In reality, of Kuon's acquaintances, hardly anyone had noticed this falseness.

Even so, Yahiro had not been mistaken.

After all—a number of people: the Orihara sisters and Kuronuma Aoba, had acutely noticed that discrepancy, and grasped his true nature.

Himeka had once again been interrupted, but she did not mind and continued to deliver her warning to the two of them.

"I don't know that girl, and I'm happy that she's worried about my sister, but... You should already know the Headless Rider is dangerous. You should stop trying to approach it."

"Yeah... I understand, but..."

Then Yahiro, who had been silent up till then, spoke apologetically.

"I think, even if we say that... that girl probably won't stop searching."

"...Why?"

"She said, 'The Headless Rider isn't a bad person.' It's strange to think of, but that girl... seems to know the Headless Rider. It looked like there were some private reasons, so I didn't ask, though."

"..."

Hearing that, Himeka thought —

And looking away, reached slowly for her own belongings.

"I see... I understand. I can accept that."

With a small nod, she turned her back on the two of them.

"Whatever that girl thinks, I've warned you as I could. Anything that happens after is your choice, so I won't be responsible. I'm sorry."

"No, that isn't something you should apologise for, either."

As Yahiro said this, she stopped midstep, and turned towards them to speak.

"...I'll feel better if you let me say this; this is the last time. ...You shouldn't get involved with the Headless Rider. If you want to see your aims through, you should choose Heiwajima Shizuo."

And—hearing her next sentence, Yahiro's back was drenched with sweat.

Because her voice, which had been virtually emotionless till then, had definitely taken on an intense hatred.

"I think... the Headless Rider is a cruel demon."



In front of Raira Academy.

In front of Raira Academy, the sun had already set.

The time for club recruitment had already ended, and the small number of students still around was diminishing.

Amidst this was Yahiro and Kuon, who had finished exchanging information.

"But earlier, Himeka-chan, she was really—something, wasn't she? She's very pretty, but there don't seem to be a lot of guys approaching her. But instead it's like this, how strange? Don't you find it interesting?"

Towards Kuon, who sought agreement, Yahiro said, wearily,

"You seem to be able to talk about Tatsugami-san very lightly, don't you..."

"That's my strength. No matter how heavy the topic I can be positive and aggressive, you know? Even if Himeka-chan's sisters didn't go missing and it was that their brutally murdered bodies were found, I'd be able to accept it positively. 'At least Himeka-chan herself wasn't the one killed'... I'd say."

"That seems more of a horrible flaw than a strength..."

Even as Yahiro felt uncomfortable at the thought that Kuon might have just said something very low as a human being, he did not voice this directly.

In response, as though having remembered something, Kuon said,

"Ah, but Yahiro, I didn't think you would really join the library committee."

"Eh? Is something wrong?"

Yahiro asked this honestly, and Kuon quickly denied.

"No, it's not wrong, it's not wrong at all~? How was it?"

"Ah, I told Tatsugami-san about it earlier, too. Thank goodness all of the seniors were nice. The committee president seemed very mild, too."

"Yeah, it should be the same library committee president who talked to us at the orientation. The one who looks popular with the girls, that cool senior with the glasses."

Kuon said this enviously, to which Yahiro asked:

"Kuon-kun, aren't you joining any clubs or committees?"

"Me? I'll pass. I want to do part-time jobs and stuff after school."

"What part-time jobs do you do?"

"Eh, I'm a bit of a handyman. Just earning some small cash."

His tone was light, but it was clear he was being deliberately vague.

Yahiro deduced it was probably something Kuon did not want to be asked about, and did not push the issue.

Instead, Yahiro chose to ask about something else.

"Speaking of which... Kuon-kun, it seemed like you know about that... Heiwajima Shizuo?"

"It's not that I know, per se... No one who's hung around Ikebukuro before wouldn't know. About that monster."

"..."

Yahiro felt a stab in his chest at the word 'monster'.

Not noticing this, Kuon began to shoot off information about Heiwajima Shizuo.

"I said it yesterday already, but I've seen that Heiwajima Shizuo throwing a vending machine before... That guy's huge trouble. There's a senior in third grade, Kuronuma Aoba, who looks out for me; even he said, 'don't pick a fight with him no matter what'."

—To have everyone say, 'don't pick a fight with him no matter what'...

—I'm envious...

Even as Yahiro, who had only ever been provoked into fights, felt these twisted emotions, Kuon continued chattering on about Heiwajima Shizuo.

"The thing's that there isn't anyone who can get him to stop. Apparently he listens to his seniors at work, but once the fight gets started there's no stopping him either. Only Simon from the sushi place can do any..."

Midsentence, Kuon clapped his hands together.

"Right, let's go eat sushi! Sushi!"

"Ehh?!"

Having been invited for a meal without any rhyme or reason, Yahiro's expression twitched as he remembered the contents of his wallet.

"S, sorry. Today's not a very convenient..."

"What are you saying! I'll treat you! It'll be a treat, a treat!"

"Ehhhh?!"

Kuon slapped his back as he said things that only further shocked Yahiro.

"No, that's bad! Sushi's... Even if it's conveyor belt sushi it's..."

Even for conveyor belt sushi, with every plate priced at 100 yen, 5 plates would be 500 yen. It was not a big sum for Yahiro, who hailed from a wealthy family, but it was not the kind of amount he could receive as a treat from someone he had just met the day before. No, in fact, Yahiro felt a sense of resistance at the idea of being treated for even 100 yen.

Yet Kuon smiled and began to walk, ignoring his feelings.

"Ah, I'm fine with conveyor belt sushi, too, but this time the sushi won't be moving!"

"! Wait, wait a minute, in that case I'll just drop by the bank or a convenience store to draw some money, so..."

"It's fine, it's fine! There's a place with a student discount for the new term! A crab course for one person's just 380 yen!"

Could it just be three to five small servings?

If that were not it, that was a price so low it was unsettling.

Unheeding of Yahiro's unease, Kuon took a leaflet from his bag, and waved it in front of him.

"It's called Russia Sushi... It's run by two Russians; it's quite famous around here, you know?"



Along Kawagoe Highway. A certain apartment.

Awakusu Akane arriving at that apartment had been no coincidence.

It was the apartment the Headless Rider had brought her to once previously.

It was also a place she had been slightly before that.

As she recalled clearly that it had been along Kawagoe Highway, she had used a service on an online map that displayed the scenery around the road, and after a thorough scour had been able to find the entrance to this familiar-looking apartment complex.

It was the day after the entrance ceremony for middle schoolers also, and in the afternoon now school had let out, Akane arrived at the apartment residence of the Headless Rider.

"Um... Kishitani-sensei's unit..."

She remembered that the name of the doctor she had met at the Headless Rider's house had been 'Kishitani'.

As her acquaintance Heiwajima Shizuo often mentioned him, there was no mistaking that he cohabited with the Headless Rider.

Perhaps because the place was old, despite the fact that it looked expensive there were no security guards around,

and anyone could make their way right to the door of any unit.

Akane checked each doorplate as she ascended the stairs, and finally on the top floor came across one that read 'Kishitani' beneath the apartment number.

Pressing the doorbell yielded no reaction.

After a ten-second interval she tried again, but still there was no response from inside the house.

The electric meter by the door showed little movement.

It seemed no more than devices like the refrigerator and the video player's time display were in use.

Concluding that this level of inactivity could not be justified by the residents simply going out to shop or work, Akane felt a surge of uneasiness as she left the apartment unit behind her.

Next her feet brought her to the underground carpark.

But there as well there were only a number of cars supposedly belonging to the residents, and no trace of the Headless Rider.

"..."

Not even a trace of the Headless Horse that had brought her here before.

As if to say everything that had happened back then was only a dream.

Feeling an irrational sadness, Akane continued walking in the underground carpark.

As if pushed on by the hope that something remained. However small that something was.

Like this some time passed —

And then, a familiar voice came from behind Akane.

"Akane ojou-san, what's the matter?"

When she turned, there stood a man slightly younger than her father.

"! Shiki-san..."

Furthermore, two even younger men stood behind him.

Their faces looked trustworthy, but the air around them announced that they were not upstanding members of society. Akane knew that they were people from her father's organisation—people from an organisation that carried out illegal activities.

Even so, Akane had met the man standing between them, Shiki, numerous times before she knew about her parents' and grandfather's work; occupation aside, she understood that he was an acquaintance of her father's and trustworthy in that capacity.

"Shiki-san... Did you come looking for the Headless Rider, too?"

At this, Shiki heaved a small sigh.

"So you were too, after all."

"..."

"It would be best not to get too involved with the Headless Rider's case. That courier's from **this side** that you dislike so much, after all, Akane ojou-san."

Shiki gently told Akane not to interfere, to which she replied:

"But... that person isn't the kind to kidnap anyone."

"I believe so as well. However, you see, if the Headless Rider is innocent, that would mean someone else entirely, someone completely unknown to us, is behind the kidnappings."

"...!"

"You should know what would happen if you met with a kidnapper like that, yes?"

Akane, as she heard all that Shiki said, felt that his words were perfectly logical.

But whether she could accept it and whether she would back down were two different things altogether.

Probably noticing that Akane had not been convinced, Shiki then brought up her father's name.

"Mikiya-san is worried as well. That you might be getting yourself into danger."

"...It's okay. I'm in middle school already..."

There was some sincere guilt, but Akane averted her eyes.

Shiki shook his head at her slowly.

"Whether you're in middle school or high school, or even if you're an adult past twenty, danger is danger. Especially so when a kidnapper is involved here."

Shiki was not pressuring her; he merely spoke severely.

"Everyone has their own role. Why don't you let the police and I handle this case?"

After a short silence, Akane nodded slowly.

"All right. Please take care of the issue with the Headless Rider and the doctor."

"Of course."

"If everyone has a role, it should be fine if I ask about my senior around school, right? It's possible she just ran away from home. I want to try looking in that direction."

"...That..."

To Shiki, who had a complicated expression, Akane continued.

"I won't go near any danger. And there are seniors who've offered to search with me. If I'm with them, it's fine, right?"

After looking in Akane's eyes for a while, Shiki shook his head wearily.

"...Please warn those seniors not to go anywhere dangerous, either."

"! Thank you so much! Shiki-san! I'll contact you if I find anything!"

Akane nodded quickly, and began to head off.

After watching her leave, Shiki called out to one of the young people beside him.

"Hey, send the miss off."

"Yes."

The young man bowed, and quickly chased after Akane.

Finally, as he affirmed that Akane had gone completely from the underground carpark, he cracked his neck, and—in a voice small enough his subordinates could not hear, he murmured bitterly.

"Goodness, maybe it's the influence of Rakuei Gym."

Remembering Akane's past self, he smiled bitterly as he continued.

"Back when she was kidnapped it felt like she was younger than her age, but she's changed a lot in a year and a half."



Russia Sushi.

Russia Sushi was a unique sushi restaurant in the downtown of Ikebukuro.

It was a little further down from the front of Tokyu Hands on 60-Storey Street, and as there was a bowling alley just across the road, people of all ages from students to salarymen passed by the store.

Its storefront gave off such a Russian feel that it seemed forced.

But the furniture inside of the store, the counter- and traditional-style seating, were spot-on for a sushi restaurant.

Seated at the counter, Yahiro glanced around nervously.

In general it was similar to the sushi restaurants he knew of, but the decorations were foreign, and there were dishes on the menu he had never seen before, like 'Borscht Warship', or 'Kremlin Peak'.

With the sharp-eyed white man at the counter and the large black man receiving customers, the interior of the store made it seem more like a Japanese restaurant in Russia.

"Hey~, a delicious sushi celebration for the sparkling new freshmen. Sparkling students and sparkling rice, eat before the toppings dry up."

*(*Sparkling—pika-pika. Dry—kapi-kapi.)*

Speaking in a way that made it hard to judge if his Japanese was proficient or just bad, a large black man, a tag on his breast reading 'Simon', carried the sushi over to Yahiro and Kuon.

There were easily more than ten pieces of sushi on the plate, and it was unbelievable that this could cost just 380 yen per head.

—What now?

—They couldn't have... put anything strange inside...

Yahiro, who was timid by nature, hesitated for a moment before picking up the food with his chopsticks.

"...T, thanks for the food."

Yahiro said this nervously, but—

"...it's delicious."

Eyes widening, he murmured this unthinkingly.

"I know, right? This store has lots of things to nitpick if you want, but the food is good, it is."

“Yes, it’s really good. It’s like the sushi from Minato town.”

Hearing the students’ conversation, Simon smiled and gave them a thumbs-up.

“Oh~, Mr Director here’s a discerning customer. You can’t fight on an empty stomach, you know? If you win tighten your helmets*; if you lose loosen your belts and sleep full of dreams on a full stomach. Want a plate of dreamy sushi?”

(*Idiom; if you win all the more you should be on guard.)

Simon pointed at the store’s menu as he said this, but seeing that it said, ‘Cheap prices! All market price!’ Yahiro politely declined from ordering more.

After having a taster of all of the sushi, he spoke to Kuon again.

“Right, about that person Heiwajima Shizuo... Where should I go if I want to meet him?”

“Where... He’s always hanging around here, I’d guess he turns up once every three days? He’s very obvious with that bartender uniform and his hair dyed blond, so you’ll know when you see him, too. But you say you want to meet him, but what are you planning to do when you do, anyway. It’s really dangerous, yeah? If you say you’re just sightseeing you’ll get killed, you know?”

“I see...”

“Well, they say he’s softened just a bit now, but until the year before at least he was really something, you know? Apparently when he punched delinquents they’d fly ten metres away.”

Here, the store owner, who had been listening in to their conversation from behind the counter, spoke as he washed his knife.

“Boys, you’re interested in Heiwajima Shizuo?”

“Eh? Ah... yes.”

“I won’t say anything bad. But if you have nothing better to do it’s **best for both parties** if you leave him alone.”

Saying this, the storeowner stared straight at Yahiro and Kuon.

Unlike Simon, the storeowner spoke fluent Japanese.

Sensing the weight in his words, Yahiro and Kuon kept quiet and listened to him.

“Even he is only human. He’s not like some animal in the zoo that enjoys being looked at, and you don’t want to get hurt unnecessarily either, right?”

“That...”

Yahiro trailed off there, and Kuon looked away and shrugged.

Hearing what the storeowner had to say, negative feelings rose up inside Yahiro once more.

—Yeah, it’s just as he said.

—I’m not planning to pick a fight with him, but... aren’t I just looking at this Shizuo in the same way those who called me a monster saw me?

As Yahiro looked down glumly the storeowner glanced between Yahiro’s hands for a while, and as he continued with his next task he said,

“Though from what I see, **you boys have some issues yourselves...**”

“Eh?”

“No matter what you choose to do, live straightforwardly. That’s the key to living without losing faith in yourself.”

“...”

What exactly had the storeowner sensed within them?

Feeling as if the lowliness within himself had been seen through completely, Yahiro suddenly became fearful.

“Um... Thank you very much. I’ll be careful.”

“...”

The storeowner said nothing beyond that, and sliced his fish silently.

After a moment of silence, Kuon elbowed Yahiro’s arm, and whispered:

“Ah well, you see, right? He isn’t the kind you go looking for just for interest’s sake, that Heiwajima Shizuo.”

“Ah, yeah...”

Yahiro replied tonelessly, and as if to revive him from his lifeless state, Kuon brought up a new topic.

“More importantly, Tatsugami-san’s little sister? Let’s think about how we’re going to find her.”

“Right, how should we do that...”

“If it were in the past we could’ve just used the Dollars, too...”

“Dollars?”

At the sudden appearance of this strange term, Yahiro frowned as he sipped his tea.

“Ah, the Dollars, they were a colour gang around Ikebukuro up till the year before... Well, some things happened and they broke up. We call it a colour gang, but it was based in the internet... There were middle schoolers and the average salarymen or housewives joining it as a kind of interest group.”

“Wow...”

Thinking on it, he vaguely recalled encountering the term when he was reading up on the Headless Rider on the internet. However, as it was spoken of as a ‘hundreds-strong gang’, he remembered getting scared and not looking it

up in too much detail.

"The Dollars community had lots of information about Ikebukuro, so it was convenient... If you were looking for someone you could just find them in the blink of an eye!"

"I see... Tokyo's amazing, after all."

"The Dollars was definitely an unusual group even for Tokyo. Though well, I doubt the people who were in there would broadcast that they used to be in the Dollars."

Stuffing the last sushi on the plate into his mouth, Kuon swallowed and continued, scoffing.

"It's all been left way back in the past, though, so now they're just a relic; only their name and the rumours are left. That's all there is now, for both the Dollars and the Yellow Scarves."

And the smile suddenly vanished from his face, as he added, as if to himself:

"The Blue Square... might still make it."



Somewhere in the city. An abandoned building.

It was a building in a place far-flung from the heart of the city.

It seemed to have been abandoned halfway through construction; it was a normal building up to the second floor, but everything above had been left unfinished, and the exposed metal frames cast disconcerting shadows out onto the street.

In this building rang out the voice of a single man.

"Oi, oi... I used to be an important guy in the Blue Square, you know? D'you understand, oi."

A man with his face and arm wrapped in bandages, who gave off the feel of a delinquent—Horada—provoked the boys obviously younger than himself.

"Seriously—I got all my hopes up when I heard the Blue Square'd revived, but all you kids are either stupid or still pissing your pants."

In front of Horada, who sat on a sofa that must have been moved here from somewhere, were gathered the current members of the organisation he had once belonged to—the Blue Square.

Kuronuma Aoba, at the core of this group, listened to Horada silently.

Yoshikiri, who was next to him, had for a while now been glaring as if to ask, 'Can I just kill this guy?', but after suppressing him with a glance Aoba smiled pleasantly as he replied.

"No, we're deeply sorry. I too heard of your legends from my seniors, Horada-san."

"Oh? R, really?"

"They said, whether it was when we infiltrated the Yellow Scarves and wrecked havoc, or when we shot Heiwajima Shizuo—without Horada-san's presence, the Blue Square of today couldn't have been at all."

"Ah, no.... Yes! Yes, exactly. Well, to say I was the pillar of the Blue Square back then wouldn't be an exaggeration in the least."

Now Yoshikiri's eyes seemed to be asking, 'What does he mean, exaggeration?', but ignoring this, Aoba spoke.

"Yes, I've always heard about you from Aniki, Horada-san."

"Aniki...? Huh? Weren't you called Kuronuma or something?"

“Yes.”

“Did I know any Kuronumas...”

Horada puzzled as he opened the can of beer in his hands, and Aoba smiled as he said.

“Ah, our parents divorced, so our names are different. Horada-san, you would know my brother too, I’d think?”

“Huh~, and what’s his name?”

“He’s called... Izumii Ran.”

Horada spurted out the beer he had been drinking.

“I, Iii, Izumii... -san?”

Horada turned green as he asked this, to which Aoba replied, still smiling.

“Yes; Aniki’s currently in the Awakusu-kai, but once he hears you’ve come out of jail, Horada-san, I think he’ll surely make his way to meet you as soon as he can, you know?”

“I, I see. It’s Izumii-san. Haha.”

The nature of his gaze towards Aoba changing dramatically, Horada slowly rose from the sofa.

“W, Well, send my regards to Izumii-san. It must be tough being so young and all, yeah.”

His fear of the man Izumi fluctuating in his voice, Horada began to walk.

“Yes, since Ei Li-pei* returned to Dragon Zombie we’ve been scuffling all this time.”

At those words, Horada’s shoulders shuddered.

“...Yeah, that Ei person, I see.”

“But if you would be so kind to be our backer, Horada-san, we would have the confidence to upscale our fight into a proper war.”

“Ha... Haha. Well~, much as I’d really love to do that, I’m busy with my own things too, and anyway it’s not too good for the gang if an old boy* butts in, right?”

(*Ex-member.)

Breaking out in cold sweat, Horada left quickly.

“Well, work hard, all right? I’ll support you from the shadows, too! ‘Kay? Bye!”

With that, Horada escaped the building.

After he had disappeared, Aoba and the others began to talk.

“Eh, that’s one of the reasons the Blue Square died off that one time, I’d say.”

Aoba shrugged as he replied,

“Well; that was fully within my expectations, anyway. Wouldn’t you say he tried harder than most?”

“Anyway, even if he was in jail... If he doesn’t even know about Ei Li-pei, he’s pretty much an outsider already.”

“Yeah, that’s true. The Blue Square doesn’t really need him. I was thinking he might have changed after going to jail, like Aniki.”

Aoba snorted, and sat himself down on the sofa Horada was on before.

“Speaking of which, those injuries... were by Heiwajima Shizuo?”

“Yeah, he got it when he was following his juniors from high school to pick up girls. And apparently the one they trying to pick up was Kururi-chan, what a joke.”

“...”

At Aoba, who had gone silent for a moment, the surrounding people pressed.

"Oh, hey, your face says it's not a joke, Aoba-kun."

"Well, if that old man had touched her he'd be swimming in a sea of blood by now."

"And you still say she's not your girlfriend. But you're so passionate..."

"...I'll kill you!"

Flaring up unreasonably, Yoshikiri reached over; dodging his hand smoothly, Aoba stood up and changed the topic.

"But well... Heiwajima Shizuo's grown soft, too. To let him off with just that."

"R, really...?"

At the frowns of his comrades, Aoba said,

"Well, he's softened, but that doesn't mean he's any weaker... Now that annoying informant's off the streets, it might finally be time for that guy to disappear from the world of gang fights."

Ignoring the fact that he himself was a high school student, Aoba spoke words of wisdom.

"Everything gets passed to a new generation eventually. We're no exception, either."

And after some thought, he sighed, as though somewhat bored.

"Ah, there's no one to succeed Heiwajima Shizuo, though."



A few hours later. On the streets of Ikebukuro.

—How did it turn out this way?

Mizuchi Yahiro wracked his brains with all his might, and returned to his past.

Various images flashed in his mind, and the feelings that accompanied them sent shivers through his body.

A biting coldness in the air.

The unique smell of the onsen.

The feeling of being embraced by someone.

Life at the inn.

His first day at school.

The fear at suddenly being entangled with older students.

And then the flowing blood, and the pain in his fists.

blood blood blood bloodbloodbloodblood

"Monster"

"Monster"

"Monster"

"Monster"

eyes full of fear "Monster" rejection "Monster" someone's broken teeth "Monster"

As his life since birth appeared in his brain, he realised his life was flashing before his eyes, and quickly drove the images out of his head.

—No no no.

—What I need to think about is... what happened a minute ago.

—And... what I must do... from now on.

Cold sweat dripped down his cheek. The scene of reality spread wide in front of his eyes was, in fact, simple.

The street junction. The surrounding onlookers.

Standing before his eyes—a man with blond hair and sunglasses, wearing his signature bartender uniform.

Heiwajima Shizuo.

This living urban legend was not a product of rumours or fake videos on the internet.
As if to prove this, the legend stood before Yahiro, as the reality before his eyes.
Even from 3 metres away one could tell his temples were twitching with anger.
The rise and fall of his shoulders with his breathing was like an animal's.
His eyes glinted sharper than those of a wild dog with its prey in front of its eyes; any ordinary person would've been rooted to the spot if they met that gaze.
And the hostility of that 'monster'—Heiwajima Shizuo—was now **directed solely at the one boy named Mizuchi Yahiro**.
—Why...
—Why did it turn out like this...
The gazes of the onlookers were split.
Half were curious at being able to witness Heiwajima Shizuo's strength.
The other half were pitying, thinking, 'That high schooler's going to die'.
There were hardly any afraid of Shizuo's strength.
Because those who knew of his strength had long distanced themselves from this place to avoid being caught in the storm of violence.
At the same time, as such, Yahiro became the most terrified person on the scene.
Although being the target of the hostility of a man who threw vending machines around, he would have been the most terrified in any case.
And Yahiro was a coward by nature.
He did not want to die. He was afraid. He wanted to survive.
He wanted to distance himself from the source of his fear.
Which is why he tried, desperately, to remember.
How things had come down to this.
In order to think of a solution—some way to distance himself from the fear.
—I was at the sushi restaurant, talking about him...
—The storeowner talked to me, so I was thinking I should stop looking for him...
—And then we went to look for Tatsugami-san's little sister...
—Ah, right. It was a coincidence.
—I was **just dragged in** by coincidence.
It felt like a long time had passed, but in fact it had only been a few seconds.
Perhaps the natural analgesia in his mind accompanying the flashing of his life before his eyes had thrown off his sense of time.
Even if it was no more than an illusion, because he had this amount of time, Yahiro was able to recall what had occurred a minute ago.
And he once again understood.
That the reason why this hostility was being directed towards him—was without doubt no other than his own cowardice.
The boy's line of sight was angled downwards from Heiwajima Shizuo.
Lying on the asphalt—fallen on his back, was a green-haired boy.

Yahiro had only, only been afraid.
That the first 'friend' he had ever made might disappear before his eyes.
That if he did nothing Kotonami Kuon might die.
He had only, only, only wanted to run away.



A few minutes ago.

That day, Heiwajima Shizuo was irritated.
When he had turned up at his company's office, he had heard an odd rumour.
—'The Headless Rider is kidnapping people.'
A new employee who did not know Shizuo was acquainted with the Headless Rider had been very enthusiastically spreading information from an affiliate blog – a news site that gathered information about Ikebukuro.
As it was a site that earned income from the advertisements around the articles, it often titled the articles dramatically so as to catch interest and hence boost viewership—
When he had seen the title, "Announcing the revival of an urban legend": Looks like the Headless Rider's the culprit behind the serial disappearances in Ikebukuro!', Shizuo had said, 'Oi, where do I go to meet the shitty bastard who wrote that...?', and as such until the president and Tom had arrived at the office no one came near him.
As Shizuo had no one to vent that anger out on, he had quashed that rage into his belly while he faced that day's work.
"Now... Hey, calm down. Let's have sushi or something, forget the bad things."
"...yeah."
"I'm sure Russia Sushi had some discounts other than the students' one."
Shizuo, who had somehow finished the day's work with that gloominess, was heading towards Russia Sushi with Tom, but then—
"I gotta think the Headless Rider's the kidnapper after all, you know?"
A leisure facility containing a bowling alley, across the street from Russia Sushi.
A green-haired boy buying juice from the vending machine against its wall had said this, loudly.
"What's wrong? All of a sudden."
Yahiro had up till then been going around seeking information on the missing person as normal.
In the end, Kuon's acquaintances had had no game-changing information, and so they had returned to the front of Russia Sushi.
Just as he was buying juice at the vending machine, Kuon suddenly brought up the Headless Rider.
"No, but you see... Akane, was it? That kid was so sure there was some misunderstanding and we had to clear it up... But the Headless Rider's a monster in the end, after all, right?"
"No, that's..."
"You came to Ikebukuro just to sightsee monsters, yourself, didn't you?"
"That's... well..."
Unable to answer this clearly, Yahiro mumbled his reply as he pressed the button on the vending machine.

“Anyway, whether the Headless Rider’s a human or a monster, they’re a good-for-nothing, is what I’m saying. It’s not strange for them to be kidnapping people. I was spreading that around on Twittia, and no one disagreed, you know? Everyone already knows. The Headless Rider’s just trash, it’s only expected that they’d kidnap people.”

“Twittia?”

“Ah~... Ah, it’s something like a blog. Speaking of which, that tweet of mine got reprinted in several news articles~. It got really big. Well, I feel bad for that little miss Akane.”

“Reprinted in the news? That... Do they pay you money for that?”

Having only used the internet to search for information on the Headless Rider and such, Yahiro was unfamiliar with these online services or special sites, and was temporarily unable to understand what Kuon was saying.

Thinking he should take the time to ask about this, Yahiro waited for an answer as he slowly took his canned juice from the slot of the vending machine.

“...”

“?”

But there was no answer at all.

“Kuon-kun?”

Thinking he must have missed it, Yahiro stood up and turned around – and faced that scene.

Before Yahiro’s eyes, a blond-haired man, temples twitching, had Kuon raised midair, hand fisted in his collar.

For an instant Yahiro froze, uncomprehending.

When he realised that blond-haired man was ‘Heiwajima Shizuo’, countless questions rose within him.

—Eh?

—Heiwajima Shizuo...?

—I saw him in videos.

—The real thing?

—Lifting Kuon-kun so effortlessly with one hand...

—No, uh, why?

Yahiro was was immobile, feeling like he might be having a nightmare—but the whimpers of Kuon, hoisted in the air, returned him to reality.

“W, wait! What are you doing?!”

Yahiro ran up to them hurriedly, but a man with dreadlocks cut in front of him.

“Stop; don’t go near him so carelessly, you’ll get hurt.”

“...”

The man with dreadlocks appeared to have no ill will; with a troubled expression, he called out to Shizuo.

“Oi, Shizuo...”

But the man’s voice did not seem to have reached those ears, as Heiwajima Shizuo, temples twitching, ground out gravely:

“...Oi, kid.... Was it you...? Who spread that useless rumour...”

“Agah... Wai... a minute...”

Kuon, legs thrashing, yelled desperately to defend himself.

“I, I wasn’t saying anything bad about you, Heiwajima-san! Really! P, please believe me!”

“Aah...? I don’t care... ‘cause there’s nothing I can do whatever people say about me, that’s how I’ve always lived...”

With the barest grip on his rationality, Shizuo continued on, his voice as though echoing from hell itself.

"But you know... There's no way I can keep quiet when my friend's being treated like a kidnapper... can I?"

"F, friend... Th, then, you're really, friends with..."

"**That person**, she's not the type who could kidnap someone and make people cry... Well... she drives around without headlights, so... it can't be helped that people say bad things about that..."

It looked like despite brimming with anger, he was trying his hardest not to hit Kuon.

"...And on top of that you lie to Akane... That doesn't make sense, right...? Does it...?"

Upon hearing this exchange, Yahiro understood Shizuo's anger.

It was simple.

It was not unreasonable to be angry that his friend was being treated like a kidnapper and that that rumour was being spread around to everyone.

And it seemed that Heiwajima Shizuo and Awakusu Akane were indeed acquainted after all.

With the combination of several factors, it was not unreasonable that Heiwajima Shizuo's anger had exploded.

—What bad timing...!

—And Kuon-kun, saying things like that, it's like provoking him directly...

—...?

In his chest was a disturbance other than his fear towards Heiwajima Shizuo.

Yahiro was feeling that same uneasiness towards Kuon as before, but he had no time to address that right now.

In the time Yahiro had hesitated, Kuon's mouth had run off with excuses to save his own life.

"N, no, wait. I wasn't even the one who said the Headless Rider's the kidnapper... Geboh..."

"Oi, kid. You might think it's unreasonable, but you should just apologise for now, okay?"

The man with the dreadlocks said this to the boy Shizuo held aloft, but as if he had heard nothing, Kuon, panicked, dropped a bomb that was completely unfunny.

"Let's all calm down! Okay?! S, see, if anything happens to me, won't it cause trouble for your **little brother**?"

"..."

"I know, I do. Your brother's really famous, right? If I spread this online it could even get his blog flamed, you know? Yeah?"

At those words that could well have been taken as a threat, Tom's face instantly blanched.

Because he knew what had come of the debtor who had said the same thing once.

"Y, you fool! Are you trying to kill yourself?!"

"Eh...?"

Practically in tandem with Kuon's confused utterance —

"Huh...?"

He found his body being thrown in the air.

"Wha, wai... OOOOooh?!"

And Shizuo's fist came straight towards Kuon's falling body.

More than the sound of impact, it was the sound of breakage that rang out into the surroundings.

When people turned, there was the body of a green-haired boy flying through the air.

Flying several metres, Kuon's body tumbled to the asphalt.

"Ahh! K, Kuon-kun! ...Uwah?!"

Yahiro, anxious, tried to run over, but his legs tangled and he tripped over himself.

It was then that he realised his legs were shaking violently.

—H, huh...

—What should I do, this... It's the first time.

Since his childhood, Yahiro had lived under the fear of many things.

But what the boy felt towards the existence before him known as Heiwajima Shizuo was a completely different kind of 'fear' unfamiliar to him.

"Good grief... He went and did it..."

Frowning, Tom shook his head slowly.

Considering if he should call an ambulance, he decided to check on the condition of the boy who had been punched first, but as he raised his head he noticed.

"...Shizuo?"

That Shizuo was walking quickly towards the fallen boy.

Had he on reflection decided he had overdone it; was he going to help him?

Such a hopeful perspective passed through his mind, but Tom quickly dispelled the notion.

For as Shizuo walked past his face was still not free from anger.

—Oi oi, no way.

—If he deals a second blow right now that kid will really die!

"Oi, wait, Shizuo!"

Tom usually waited the storm out from afar when Shizuo exploded, but this time he spoke up to stop him.

But as if he had not heard, Shizuo did not stop.

The young man in the bartender uniform moved right in front of the fallen boy, and shifted one leg back.

—Oi?! Is he going to kick him?!

"Shizuo!"

Tom ran forward to protect the boy.

In that instant —

Something rushed past his face with incredible speed.

"?!"

Before the eyes of Tom, still stunned by the sound whipping past his ear, the 'object' slammed into the back of Shizuo's head.

It was completely unexpected.

A dull thump sounded, and after an interval of about a second, the 'object' fell to the ground.

The 'object', which gave off a metallic sound as it rolled on the ground, was **a can of juice**.

The can that had zoomed past had impacted the back of Shizuo's head precisely, and just like that succumbed to gravity and fell to the ground.

In words alone the scene was uncomplicated, but all who witnessed it swallowed in unison, and the premonition of the tragedy to come shook their bodies.

It was a can still filled with its contents, thrown with the force of a baseball.

It was not only a weapon; that direct hit to the back of the head could have even been fatal.

Shizuo, who had been an inch away from kicking Kuon, stopped, and turned, slowly, creakingly, like a clockwork doll.

At the point of his gaze was a boy.

Like the green-haired boy at Shizuo's feet, he wore a Raira Academy uniform.

His shoulders heaved as he breathed, and his face had broken out in cold sweat.

As he had frozen in a throwing position, it was certain that he had been the one to throw the unopened can at Shizuo.

Even so, Shizuo slowly opened his mouth, glancing at the can at his feet, and asked a question to confirm this.

"Just now... were you the one... who threw this at me...?"

His voice seemed to reverberate from hell itself.

The boy's forehead was drenched in sweat, and his breathing erratic.

To the surrounding people, it was clear he was so afraid he might soon faint from the fear.

But the boy gulped, and then—with a shaking voice, he spoke.

"...You're—going too far."

And then the boy straightened where he stood, and to the 'monster' standing those few metres in front of him, clearly declared:

"If it's a fight you want... I will—be your opponent."



And with that, the present.

—Ahh, that was it.

As he was drenched in the terrible murderous intent directed his way, Yahiro remembered, crystal clear, what had led to this.

—I—picked a fight.

—Me...?

—That can't be, right?

He, who had had fights picked with him so much it was unfair, who knew that fear better than anyone else: what had he just done?

As this realisation came upon him, Yahiro himself became fearful.

The murderous aura of the man standing before his eyes, and his disbelief towards himself.

Sandwiched between these two sources of fear, Yahiro's heart felt soon to collapse.

The situation a moment ago, where his classmate Kuon had been assaulted by the monster Heiwajima Shizuo.

What Yahiro had feared most in the world, up till a few seconds ago, was that a human who could laugh while talking to someone like him would disappear from the world.

Had the one collapsed at Shizuo's feet been Himeka, he would probably have done the same thing.

Although it was unlikely to happen, had it been Awakusu Akane or Orihara Mairu, or even the president of the library committee he had just met today, perhaps Yahiro would still have provoked Heiwajima Shizuo.

That it was a life-risking act he himself understood.

But he feared something even more than that.

What he feared was the act of he, who had run away his entire life, abandoning the first people to have connected with him as an equal human being, and running away by himself.

In other words, he was neither being brave, nor acting in the spirit of self-sacrifice.

It was not logic, but instinct.

He had reflexively chosen the path of instinct, of running from his fears.

The foolhardy act of stopping Heiwajima Shizuo.

“...I’ll ask one more question.”

Turning this way leisurely, Heiwajima Shizuo asked.

“Do you also think... Ce— ... Ahhh... The ‘Headless Rider’ is the kidnapper?”

“...”

His answer would determine his fate.

Believing this firmly, Yahiro answered honestly.

“...I don’t know. Because I’ve never met the Headless Rider.”

“Just now... you were saying you came here to sightsee monsters, or some damn thing... Do you think she’s some kind of exhibition...?”

If he had had the ability to tell a suitable lie, probably he would have been able to evade his fears up till now by other means, and never been called a ‘monster’.

Furthermore, here Yahiro’s logic began to work itself.

Kuon was still fallen at Shizuo’s foot.

He had to direct the entirety of Heiwajima Shizuo’s hostility towards himself.

That was the conclusion of Yahiro’s logic.

The boy who, by instinct, picked a fight for the first time in his life—

By logic, delivered a challenge for the first time in his life.

—Remember, remember.

From all of the books he had read, all of the dramas he had watched in his life, he tried his hardest to pull out the words that matched and apply them.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Glaring intensely at Shizuo, Yahiro clenched his fists tightly.

“I... came all the way to Ikebukuro to sightsee monsters like you and the Headless Rider.”

After ransacking his memories, this was the best challenge he could come up with.

But one could say those words were more than sufficient to direct the attention of the man Heiwajima Shizuo completely towards himself.

“I see... Then it can’t be helped...”

Shizuo stepped, slowly, this way – and when he stood before Yahiro, he slowly clenched his fists.

“If you’re sightseeing and there’s no cage... even if that monster beats you to death... there’s nothing you can say, heaaaaaAAAAAARGH!”

A holler reminiscent of the roar of a beast echoed between the buildings of Ikebukuro.

And Shizuo’s fist, enveloped in pressure like a missile, closed in on Yahiro’s face —

And as a result the boy from Akita tasted a fear greater than he had ever experienced.



Somewhere in the city. Yahiro’s lodging.

"Whoa, what happened to your face?"

When Yahiro arrived before his home, the landlord's younger brother—Saburo—called out to him.

He was a man with a completely different air from Jiro, a free-spirited person who loved his van and an idol known as Hijiribe Ruri dearly.

It seemed he had been waxing his van in the yard of his house next doors, and happened to spot Yahiro.

"Ah... Nothing, I fell down the stairs."

"No no no, don't tell such an obvious lie."

The face Saburo saw was covered in bruises and scratches, and some places had begun to swell.

On a closer look his clothes were tattered as well, and there was no way he could have just fallen from the stairs.

"What happened? Oi, you couldn't have been bullied? I'm not planning to interfere with every single fight between kids, but if you're being ganged up on and bullied that's completely different. I can't possibly stand by while my precious relative gets beaten up."

"Ah, no..."

If he lied here things would probably just go downhill.

Thinking this, Yahiro replied honestly.

"I'm not being bullied... I fought with someone, one-on-one. I'm sorry."

Yahiro bowed his head swiftly, to which Saburo smiled as he replied:

"It's not something you should say sorry for. When I was your age all I did was fight, myself. Unless you're bullying the weak and threatening people I have nothing to say. Well, I'll tell my older brothers and the rest you fell down the stairs."

"...Thank you very much."

"But anyway, that looks pretty impressive. Who did you fight with? Is there someone in Raira so quick to get physical? Or was it someone from Kushinada High?"

As he began to wax his van, Saburo continued the casual conversation –

"Um... I don't know if you know him... It was someone with a bartender uniform, called Heiwajima-san..."

Only for the hand waxing the car to stop abruptly at Yahiro's answer.

Frowning, Saburo turned this way slowly, and said.

"You... Eh? Seriously? Why?"

"Ah, no... I made him angry... It was my fault."

"Oi oi, are you okay?! You don't need to go to the hospital or anything?"

"Yeah, it's fine... Heiwajima-san... let me off after I fell down and couldn't move anymore."

Not knowing what the boy might be thinking, Saburo sighed.

"I see, thank goodness. So it's true that Heiwajima no danna's softened as of late..."

"Do you know him?"

"Yeah. Well, kind of. If it were Heiwajima Shizuo in the past, he wouldn't have let you off with just this, you know. I wouldn't've been surprised if you had to stay in the hospital."

"I, I see..."

Togusa returned to his waxing once more, and continued over his shoulder.

"Well, if it's a normal opponent, he's not the kind to hold a grudge. If you apologise properly for making him angry when you meet again, he won't bully you anymore."

"I see... Thank you very much."

Yahiro nodded quickly, and made his way to his own room.

Togusa, watching him leave, murmured to himself as he applied the wax.

"But huh... For someone who just got beaten up by Shizuo, he's in high spirits..."

"So long as nothing got messed up when he got beaten up, it's fine, though, I guess."



Yahiro's room.

Returning to the room in the apartment complex that he boarded at, Yahiro, after heaving a deep sigh, collapsed onto the floor.

He rolled over to face up, and murmured as he stared at the ceiling.

"...I lost..."

He had lost.

Upon uttering this clearly, various feelings swirled in Yahiro's chest.

"For the first time in my life... I lost a fight... Me..."

The bones in his body creaked, and pain ran through his flesh.

Not knowing how to deal with the pain and emotions mixed in himself, he continued to gaze at the ceiling blankly.

After about ten seconds, Yahiro murmured.

"I feel angry, happy, what is this..."

Heiwajima Shizuo had truly been strong.

He could not suppress his shock that a person like that could exist.

'You're normal,' echoed the words of that tourist in his head.

"I see... So I'm normal..."

Even in his dreams he had never imagined he would feel bitterness at losing to anyone.

Yet he could not help but feel happy at that emotion welling in himself.

"I wonder if... it's fine for me to be human."

Even the pain reverberating in his body seemed to be proof of his humanity and eased his heart.

"Or... maybe both that Heiwajima-san and I are monsters...?"

Whichever way it was, Yahiro felt like he had been saved.

He was—not alone.

The world was not a tiresome cage, or anything of the sort.

And just by knowing that, he felt there was value in living.

—And... thank goodness. It was settled without getting Kuon-kun killed.

Kuon had seemed fine; after Shizuo Heiwajima had left he had helped Yahiro up normally.

The two of them had hardly talked, both dazed, but in any case one could think they were relieved just by the fact one another were alive.

Thinking about what had happened with the first friend he had made in his life, and what Himeka might say about his

injury, Yahiro drifted into sleep.

And lastly, as he remembered the faces of the people he had met the past few days—he smiled contentedly, and half-asleep, he murmured.

“I wonder, if it’s in this city... I can do well...”



However—

Yahiro had yet to notice.

The mess he had **started**.



Night time. A certain roof.

“Yo. Here you are.”

As he opened the door to the roof and appeared, Tom saw Shizuo’s back and called out to him.

This was their office, and any staff member could access the roof.

It seemed Shizuo had been gazing at the street from the roof all this time, after they had reported in the work they had done today.

“Are you bothered by what happened just now?”

“...Well, something like that.”

“About that black-haired kid?”

“Yeah... Now I think about it, he might not have been such a bad guy...”

Shizuo said this, and Tom shrugged as he voiced his opinion to Shizuo’s back.

“Well, probably because he actually challenged you to help that green-haired guy.”

“Tom-san, you think so too?”

Shizuo, his back still to Tom, murmured to himself as he faced the night scenery.

“I have to apologise the next time we meet...”

“Well, it’s fine not to be that enthusiastic, I’d say? Throwing that juice can at the back of your head—with any normal person it could have been fatal. He might be wanting to apologise to you too, you know?”

“...”

“More importantly, I was really surprised.”

Standing next to Shizuo, Tom gazed at the scenery of the city as well, as he said:

“The world really is big.”

“...Yeah.”

“In the end, you won...”

Tom glanced at the face of Shizuo, who stood beside him.

What he saw there were—bruises and scratches peeking from under the broken sunglasses.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen you get beaten up this bad, or get beaten to the ground by someone bare-handed...”

Though I did see you get your arm dislocated the year before.”

To be precise, Shizuo’s arm was in a bandage slung around his neck.

After looking at that painful-looking bandage, Tom recalled the face of the boy who had fought on par with Shizuo, and, breaking out in cold sweat, spoke.

“To think there’s a high schooler that strong around...”

Interlude: Rumours on the Internet ③

- Ikebukuro Information Site, *IkeNEW! Version IKEBUKURO*

Popular article, 'Seeking information': Looks like a high schooler who can match up to Heiwajima Shizuo has appeared!

Hello, it's the admin.

Today some unbelievable news came in-nari.

That Heiwajima Shizuo fought with a high schooler and almost lost-nari.

(Omitted)

↓ Reference video

(Outgoing Link)

It was taken with a phone from far away, so his face isn't clear-nari, but apparently that uniform's Raira Academy's, no mistake-nari.

You can see they're really fighting-nari.

There wasn't news of anyone that strong in Raira Academy before, so it has to be that-nari. It's a new student-nari.

...No, no, wait-nari. That means a boy about 15 fought with Shizuo-nari?

At any rate, everything is vague-nari.

If anyone has his detailed profile, message the admin using the form-nari.

The future of Ikebukuro lies in your hands-nari.

By the way, there's been so much yammering about it, but this 'nari' ending's going to stick around for this month-nari.

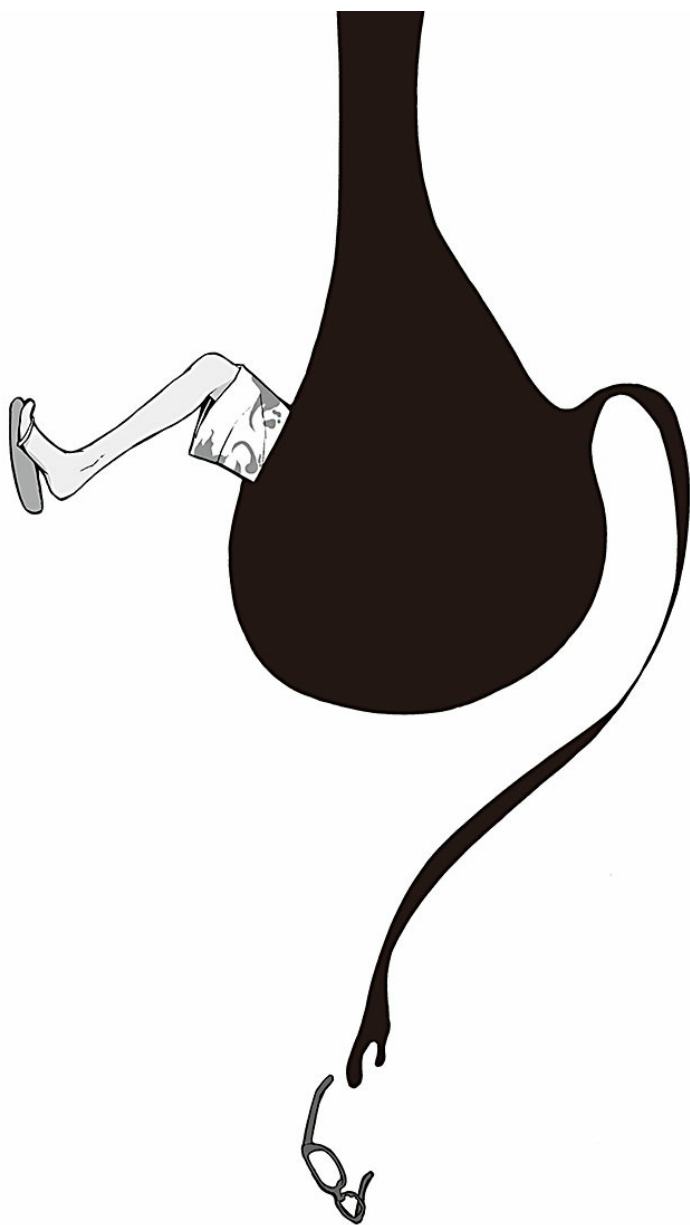
Okay-nari?

♂♀

Excerpts of tweets from *Twittia*.

- Is it true Heiwajima Shizuo lost?
 - He didn't. He won in the end.
 - Seriously? I was cheated.
 - But it seems he went down a lot of times.
 - Seriously?

- I heard Heiwajima Shizuo fought with a high schooler, but did he throw any vending machines?
 - He tried to, but just before he could the boy ducked in close and kicked his knee.
 - That's awful!
 - What is?
 - If you're raising a vending machine up and someone kicks your knee, normally that knee would buckle and break.
 - Normally no one could be raising a vending machine up in the first place...
- Raira Academy's bad news.
 - Isn't that Kushinada High nearby worse?
 - Kushinada's hopeless already.
- Speaking of which, the *IkeNEW* admin's clearly quite old already, but they're going nari-nari like some newbie, what's with that.
 - You're calling that out at this stage?
 - In the first place, how old is that admin?
 - No idea~. They've never shown their face.
 - I think they should use 'nyan'.
 - 'Nyan' is...



四章

Chapter 4A

The Newcomer

A few years ago. Ikebukuro.

"You want to know about the Headless Rider?"

A male 'informant' in a fur-lined coat shrugged as he spoke.

Replying, the informant's 'client' asked how much they should pay.

"Ah, it's fine to pay the same amount as for other information. What I can say's more limited here compared to with other things, though. The Headless Rider's one of my information sources, too."

The informant on the chair in his own room, and, looking up at the ceiling, began to talk.

"Let's make this clear before anything else. The Headless Rider is, literally, a headless rider. It's not a stunt or a costume. She's a complete 'monster'. Alien, monster, beast, fairy, demon, mononoke, freak, urban legend, UMA... Well, I'm sure different people have different words for it, and I don't have the breath to debate the fine differences in the definitions of each term."

Seeing that his client had neither flared up nor scoffed at his declaring the Headless Rider unhuman, the informant smiled as he continued.

"I see; seems like you've encountered the Headless Rider yourself. Certainly, if you witness her in real life, there's no way to think she could be of this world. If you've seen how that motorcycle doesn't give off sound from an engine, or the shadow she emits from her body, I'd say it's more amazing for someone to think it's the work of a human, you know? Ah, but the pace at which human technology evolves is terribly fast, too. Perhaps it's possible to recreate those things with today's technology."

Having spoken thus far, the informant made a slight digression.

"Ah, I find the potential of human beings truly amazing, you know? People say those who dream will surely realise those dreams someday, but with developments in neurological and virtual reality technologies, maybe the difference between our dreams and our future will be gone. The time lag of 'someday' will be gone. In the moment you dream of flying, a machine would read your mind and project a real scenery of you flying into your brain... An era like that might come to pass. Humans might reach the height of laziness and stop evolving, but I'll embrace even a future like that."

He turned his face from the ceiling to his client, and smiled happily as he continued.

"Because I love humans."

Then the conversation that had digressed returned without a hitch to its root.

"On the other hand, fundamentally, I have no love for things that aren't human. I even find them hateful. Just, well, I don't have any hatred or feelings of hostility towards the Headless Rider right now."

Grinning, the informant spoke of the 'Headless Rider'.

"Well, right now... That's just for now; if she tries to alter human society I think I'll start to dislike her."

The informant averted his eyes slightly, and, remembering things about the Headless Rider, he continued.

"The Headless Rider is mingling amongst humans, and has learnt from humans. For some reason she ended up

having to live in human society. That monster learnt what's important to humans, and what's against the rules. Ironically, because of that, she's gained a personality more upright than any punk on the street. Honestly, I feel she's achieved a surprisingly remarkable imitation of what we call human."

There the informant paused for a moment, and looking into the eyes of his client the corners of his lips twisted further. "But other humans don't see the Headless Rider as human. It would be one thing if she were a vampire, if she departed from humans no farther than the gap between double teeth; but in the end she's missing a head, a part that's so important to humans."

The client asked what he meant to say, to which the informant replied.

"The question is, what do humans do when they see something unlike them?"

He rose slowly from his chair, and walked up to a shelf with various books.

"Will they revere it; will they simply shiver in fear; will they make it their gateway to the extraordinary, their tool to escape reality; will they try to take advantage of it; will they try to kill it; will they eliminate it as something they'd hate even the sight of; or will they run from it themselves instead... What about you? Well, any answer you give is fine."

The informant stroked the spines of the books, and declared once more to his client:

"Because I love humans."

And—as if he had suddenly thought of it, he mentioned a man.

"Well, there's even someone I know who gave the completely unthinkable answer of loving the Headless Rider romantically. That, as well, I respect as one of humanity's choices."

The informant took out a number of books, and arranged them as he said:

"People exhibit different behaviours when faced with something different. Even if it's not a monster or some sort of supernatural creature; even with others who are human like themselves. A great man could be a hero in a war, but when peace comes he might immediately become feared like a monster for being preposterously strong. Depending on the people, the era, and the society in question, it's natural to have a variety of responses."

Shrugging lightly, the informant spoke ironically.

"In that sense, when a monster is born in society, it's not the humans that matter. It's the 'monster'; that's what I think."

"...In other words, out of the humans with their full spectrum of reactions, it's a matter of whose hand they take."



Present time. Ikebukuro.

"A high school student... who can fight Heiwajima Shizuo?"

Aoba's words contained clear doubt, but also honest surprise thinking how impressive it would be if it were true.

It was the Ikebukuro downtown area, at a time approaching midnight.

Although it was less crowded, there were people such as salarymen at pubs filling the streets with a presence different from that of the afternoon.

After Horada had left, Aoba and his companions had gone out into the city and were wandering randomly.

He had received a message from Mairu going, 'We're looking for a girl called Tatsugami Ai. Get the details from Kuon!'. But as Kuon, the one he needed to approach, had not attended the Blue Square gathering, he had yet to do anything about it.

—Maybe I'll ask Mairu-chan or Kururi-chan directly tomorrow...

He was thinking that as he walked when he happened to hear a rumour on the street.

—*'Heiwajima Shizuo was really beat up.'*

—*'I heard he nearly lost.'*

He thought it was ludicrous, but curiosity piqued, he stopped at a nearby corner to check with his smartphone.

And across numerous information sites and social networking services, he found information to that same effect.

"Ah, so it's IkeNEW."

Even as he saw the news on an Ikebukuro information site that he knew, Aoba was still only half-believing –

But the moment he saw the video, he went completely silent.

—There's no way... that it's special effects, right...?

—Heiwajima Shizuo going easy? No, that's not it either.

—But anyway... Those movements...

Dodging Shizuo's fists with inhuman footwork, the 'boy in the Raira uniform' was clearly trading blows with Shizuo.

Aoba, shocked that there was someone amongst his schoolmates who could move like that, saw something that caught his attention in a part of the video.

On top of the fact that the video's quality was poor, it was mostly taken from afar using the zoom function.

The face of the person fighting could not be recognised—but the person slowly getting to his feet in the corner of the video certainly could.

It was a boy in a Raira uniform as well, with green hair.

"Kotonami, huh..."

This 'boy who fought on par with Shizuo', and Aoba's junior, a member of the Blue Square, were in the same video.

As he digested this information, several emotions welled up in Aoba, and he smiled faintly.

"That guy, just who... No, just **what** did he find?"



Somewhere in the city. An abandoned factory.

"D'you think Heiwajima Shizuo... wasn't in top form? Influenza or something..."

A voice, tone light, echoed in the factory.

This factory had been used as a meeting point for both the Yellow Scarves and the Blue Square before.

Now that the Yellow Scarves were no longer around, and the Blue Square had shifted their hideout, it had come under the possession of another group entirely.

Dragon Zombie.

It was a seasoned bosozoku gang based in the Ikebukuro area, and before colour gangs had turned up it had been

called one of the two large powers, feared alongside Jyan Jyaka Jyan.

But bosozoku changed with the currents of time as well, and the Jyan Jyaka Jyan had gone underground, becoming subordinate to the Awakusu-kai; and Dragon Zombie, since its leader Ei Li-pei had left Ikebukuro for certain reasons, had lost its substance and become no more than a name.

The remaining members had worked as lackeys for an informant and done other miscellaneous things to keep the gang going if barely—but with the disappearance of that informant it had been close to disbanding.

But at this point, the gang met another turning point.

The man that led it had returned to the city.

“Shizuo’s a monster, isn’t he... That hasn’t changed after all this time, right?”

A man that looked about 20 had his back to his fellow gang members scattered around in the factory, and was looking upwards as he said this.

This was, of course, the leader—Ei Li-pei—and as he spoke to his gang he was doing something else entirely at the same time.

Moving his hands skilfully, he was throwing multiple objects in the air and receiving them with opposite hands—in other words, juggling—happily.

At that scene it would be easy to think he was not serious about what he was saying, but none of the gang members were smiling.

Because the objects he tossed into the air were ryuyoto; Chinese weapons with wide blades.

The weapons had the image of what many Japanese people called seiryuto, but in actual fact seiryuto were like naginata, with long handles.

In any case, however, the fact that they were deadly weapons remained unchanged, and the multiple knives reflected the lights as they spun quickly over Li-pei’s head with no brake on their speed.

Two young girls were sitting on the oil drums to each side of Li-pei.

Perhaps having faith in his technique, despite their positions being such that any slip would have them fall victim to the knives, their faces were calm, as they answered him.

“We saw it too, by chance.”

“It was really amazing; that kid’s the same as Shizuo.”

Hearing their replies that came one after another, the man, still juggling, smiled happily, happily, as he spoke to his gang members behind him.

“How strange... Looks like it’ll get interesting.”

In the next moment, the motion of his hand changed, and swinging his arm around, he collected the blades in his hand.

When all of his knives were in his hand he turned swiftly on his heel, and spread his arms dramatically.

“I have to go meet him, surely.”



Somewhere in the city. An alley.

"S, someone fought with Shizuo normally?! Seriously?!"

Dropping the can of beer in his hands, Horada pushed his fellow delinquent for answers..

"Oi, oi, you're not lying, right?!"

"I, it's true! I was there too! It was far away so I couldn't see his face, but that guy was definitely a Raira student!"

Hearing this, Horada clenched his fists unthinkingly.

"Oi, oi... If he's on Shizuo's class he's definitely a monster! If there's a kid like that around, we have to recruit him no matter what...!"

"Seriously?"

"That way I can boss those juniors from the Blue Square, and Dragon Zombie'd be nothing! Doesn't this just mean it's time for my era in Ikebukuro?!"

In the end, had Horada's era really arrived?

This thought passed through the minds of his friends, but none of them said it.

Because they too recognised that, if such a pawn were to fall into his hands, his position would change completely.



Ikebukuro. A certain rooftop.

As a draft of wind blew over them, Tom chided Shizuo.

"But really... You went a bit too far today, Shizuo. It doesn't seem like you to go after a kid who's already passed out on the ground to kick him."

And Shizuo frowned as he replied.

"Ah... Sorry. But it was because that green-haired kid... was hardly injured."

"Huh? Oi, there's no way he could be fine after getting hit by you..."

"The moment I punched, he blocked with his hands. And then the kid jumped backwards with the force."

"..."

Tom knew very well that Shizuo was not the kind to whip up useless excuses for himself.

And then he noticed.

That an anger was brewing in Shizuo; not on the surface—but deep inside him.

"Maybe... he was planning to frame me."

"That green kid's... the same type of person as that flea."



Takadanobaba. Kuon's apartment.

'Hey, I followed the deal, all right? I leaked that rumour to Heiwajima Shizuo at work today... Ah, to be honest, I thought I'd be killed... You really need to pay me back for this...'

Kuon grinned as he replied to the voice of the young man across the receiver.

"No, no, I'd say that'd be too nice. If anything, I could tell Shizuo, you know? You, a new employee, spread a rumour about the Headless Rider and provoked him for some small cash... Just like that."

'...That, that's... All right, all right! I won't talk about money anymore, happy? Happy?'

After hanging up, Kuon called another person.

He snorted as he walked around the room; there was no visible damage left on his body.

"Yeah... Sorry, sorry. The guy I hired was getting greedy."

'_____'

"Yeah... I was surprised too, today. Even I didn't expect that."

Kuon spoke casually, as he sat on the sofa and put the smartphone to his ear.

"There I was planning to get beaten up by Heiwajima Shizuo and make sure to send him to jail, too."

'_____? _____. ____!'

"...Well, even the people in the city are sick of Shizuo's antics. So I thought I'd give them a break. If he makes scenes again after coming back from jail, there's some freshness to that, isn't there?"

With these confounding words, he continued, smiling a smile completely unlike that of a boy, full of a joy derived from looking down at others from above.

"A new star's on the scene. We have to step up the publicity a little, yes?"



"Someone on Shizuo's level?!" "That means he has no match besides Shizuo, doesn't it!"

"Which middle school was he from?!"

"Ah, I'm not sure." "Isn't there a video with higher definition?!"

"He's seriously stronger than Shizuo?" "A local? I've never heard of him."

"Maybe he's an outsider?" "Find him." "Find him." "Find him no matter what!"

In a single night, the news had traversed the whole of Ikebukuro.

He had not defeated Heiwajima Shizuo.

He had only fought on par.

Yet, that alone was unusual.

There was a man who had fought with Shizuo by using knives or having vehicles run him over.

But it was unheard of for a person to deal real damage to Shizuo unarmed. Simon from the sushi restaurant entered the conversation now and then, but although he could control Shizuo when Shizuo went wild, they had never fought head-on, and so things never left the realm of speculation.

Most people were of this opinion, and so this event made a giant impact on the city—and drew great interest from the masses.

It showed that the man Heiwajima Shizuo had become this big a name amongst the young people of Ikebukuro.

That was why just fighting with him on equal grounds could become news.

But the person in question—Mizuchi Yahiro—without knowledge of what things had come to, was soundly asleep.
Deep in his sleep, the boy dreamt.
Of himself, living a normal life with many people.
A dream of a world that most would call 'ordinary life'.
The dream he had was itself his hope for the future.
The contents of that dream might be forgotten afterwards, but even so, the boy would likely hold onto this same hope.

As he remained unknowing that he had become a spreading urban legend.
As he remained unawares that the newcoming 'urban legend' had blown a new wind into Ikebukuro—he merely slept.
Soundly, soundly.

Chapter 4B

The Returnees

Excerpt from Tsukumoya Shinichi's 'Closed Blog'.

'Yo, it's been a while since the last post.

An informant who was my playmate disappeared from the city, so I haven't had much to do recently.

Furthermore the Dollars are gone, and the Headless Rider has been missing for the past half year.

I wonder if the visitors to this page are looking for information on the recent rumours about missing persons?

Before we talk about that, let's talk about the 'Protagonist' of this incident.

Yes, the protagonist.

If we were to compare life to a story, in most cases, the 'self living that life would be the protagonist.

But in the case where people have complex entanglements with one another—in the case where one views the situation objectively as an 'incident', there comes a time where a protagonist will be chosen amongst various persons.

The serial disappearances in Ikebukuro.

This case is no exception.

Objectively speaking... In other words, the protagonist depends on whether we take the subjective perspective of the culprit or those pursuing them; and it banks heavily on the interests of the observer as well –

But my own feeling is that the 'Headless Rider' is the protagonist.

Yes; despite having been missing for half a year, I feel they play the leading role in the incidents this past month.

This might be considered strange... It'd be making them, who was absent in Ikebukuro at the time, the central figure in this case, wouldn't it?

Even so... it's said that the lead is always the last to arrive.

Honestly, if we see the Headless Rider as the protagonist of this case, that's one fool of a protagonist.

After all, they don't seem to have notice the disaster upon them, even as things have reached a point of no return.'



Late at night. Kawagoe Highway. In front of a convenience store.

It was late at night, past two in the morning.

A 'Shadow' stood obstructing the man who exited the convenience store.

It was, literally, unquestionably, a 'Shadow'.

A black full-body rider suit with no accessories or emblems; this black ensemble was further immersed in deep black ink. The overwhelming black seemed to absorb the light from the convenience store, making it stand out even in the night.

...But the 'Shadow' wore a flamboyant Aloha shirt, and a necklace of flowers.

The strangest thing was above its neck. There was a helmet with a strange design. With everything below it dyed pitch-black, the helmet's shape and appearance lent a sense of artistry.

The face cover was as black as the mirror glass windows of a luxurious car, reflecting light from the convenience store magnificently; the contents of the helmet were completely unseeable.

...But on that helmet were stickers of mascots from regions all across Japan.

“...”

The shadow was merely silent, as though lacking life.

When the man came out of the convenience store, seeing the shadow, his face filled with happiness and love.

“Hey! Celty! Did you wait long?”

‘Not at all, it’s only been 3 minutes. More importantly, the milk and eggs?’

“I bought them! I got four in a carton for the eggs for now.”

The man held out the bag from the convenience store, and Celty, the odd woman wearing the Aloha shirt over her black rider suit, replied.

Despite the fact that she was replying, she spoke nothing, and was communicating by typing on the screen of her smartphone.

‘We emptied out the fridge before we left. Is that enough?’

“Eh, I think it’ll be fine to tide ourselves over with souvenir food. Ah, but if you make crab omelettes for me, Celty, I’m fine letting that rot!”

‘That’d be a waste. Apologise to those chefs.’

“Got it, I’ll savour it properly after it rots!”

The man nodded, eyes bright, and Celty’s shoulders heaved up and down.

‘Your priorities are the wrong way around.’

Her gesture was evidently a sigh, but there was no breathing involved.

“Hmm, would it be all right to put the eggs and milk in the sidecar?”

‘Ah, all the space is filled with baggage. It’ll be troublesome if the eggs break.’

Saying this, she opened her helmet’s face cover and—in the empty space—stuffed the bag containing the eggs and milk.

‘There.’

Celty slid the face cover back and typed this, and the man—Kishitani Shinra—smiled warmly as he nodded.

“Yeah, you’ve completely come to terms with not having a head, Celty.”



Celty Sturluson was no human.

Known as a dullahan, she was a type of fae that originated from Scotland and Ireland – a being that called on the

homes of those soon to breathe their last to inform them of their imminent deaths.

With her own severed head under her arm, riding a two-wheeled carriage drawn by a headless horse – known as the cóiste bodhar – she would visit the homes of those nearing death. If one were to carelessly open their door, they would be drenched with a full basin of blood – similar to the banshee, as a harbinger of misfortune, the dullahan was a subject of European folklore passed down the generations.

But that was in the past.

Now, as a living urban legend, and as a woman, she lived her everyday life loving the man Kishitani Shinra.

This was 'Ikebukuro's Headless Rider'—Celty Sturluson.



Kawagoe Highway.

In the nighttime, a strange motorcycle sped through the city..

It was a pitch-black motorcycle that moved without the sound of an engine, and had neither headlights nor a number plate.

It was Celty's beloved headless horse—Shooter—that had, adapting to modern society, transformed into a two-wheeled vehicle.

A large sidecar was attached to it, piled with cultural crafts and snacks from various parts of Japan, and even a flag and a wooden sword.

As she could easily control masses of shadow, attaching a black sidecar to her horse was a piece of cake.

However, as there was now insufficient space to fit a person, two of them were now riding the motorcycle together.

—We'd be able to carry more if we used a horse carriage...

—Stop it. If we stand out too much that monster will come.

As the face of a certain traffic police officer appeared in her mind, and she set aside her own problems.

—Well, anyway...

Feeling the pulse of Shinra, who was embracing her tightly from behind, the headless woman smiled in her heart.

—Riding like this isn't that bad.

Celty and Shinra earned livelihoods as a 'courier' and 'underground doctor' in Ikebukuro.

However, half a year ago they had bowed their heads to their 'clients' and taken long-term leave so as to go vacationing together.

A year after her long search for her 'Head' had reached a conclusion—Celty had decided that she wanted to learn more about the country she would be living in permanently from then on, and so the two of them had decided to tour the entire country.

Today, they returned safely to the city of Ikebukuro.

—Anyway, it was really fun.

—Maybe because I was with Shinra.

—No, maybe I could've been more relaxed on my own?

—Well, it's all good.

After thinking that, she recalled what had happened on the trip.

—Hokkaido's Snow Festival was great, and the Kerama Islands at Okinawa were pretty, too.

—Going to Shimane Prefecture in October was good, too. And the Izumo Grand Shrine was amazing.

—And touring the onsen in the Tohoku region was nice.

If she had a head on her shoulders, she would certainly be making a self-satisfied expression right about now.

Celty embraced the feeling of loneliness at the end of her vacation alongside the sense of security at returning to a familiar scenery, and continued to travel along Kawagoe Highway.

Then Celty detoured into numerous alleys so as not to be seen, and entered an apartment complex along Kawagoe Highway from its back entrance.

To the home sanctuary to her and Shinra's souls, that had been empty for half a year.



Shinra's apartment. Underground carpark.

The motorcycle was parked in the underground carpark, Celty and Shinra alighted from it slowly.

"Ahh, we're finally back. Going places is a happy thing, but in the end it's your hometown where you really settle down."

As she spoke, Celty stroked the back of Shooter, which had reverted to horse form. Shinra replied with an energy level that betrayed no weariness from their journey at all.

"So long as I'm with you, Celty, I can settle down happily anywhere! No, sorry, I can't quite settle down, I can't possibly settle with Celty right in front of gababobobobobo"

'Don't smoke your way into getting a hug!'

The pair held this usual conversation—but suddenly, a third party approached them.

"Ah~... Sorry for interrupting your romantic moment."

Celty and Shinra jumped and turned.

There, standing in the shadows of the underground carpark, was someone they were both acquainted with.

"Shiki-san?! Why are you here?"

He was an officer of the Awakusu-kai, a man who made deals with both the 'courier' and 'underground doctor'.

"Well... I heard from some young people that they saw the Headless Rider at the convenience store. I came to welcome you back."

'So that's how it is. Thank you for making your way down.'

Despite her uncertainty, Celty entered her thanks into her smartphone politely.

"Why, I was sure you were using a PDA before..."

'Yes, I bought this to try out; it's easier to use. I can type faster on a touchscreen if I charge my shadows with static.'

"...That's impressive."

After saying this, Shiki eyed Celty's get-up.

"But..."

As if they had visited the Hawaiian Centre right before coming back, Celty was currently wearing an Aloha shirt and a flower necklace.

The sidecar, which was now detached from the headless horse, was filled with random souvenirs from all over the country, looking very much like the luggage of the a mindless trend-chasing tourist.

“...By the look of it, you aren’t aware of anything.”

‘?’

“Aware of?”

Seeing how both Celty and Shinra were confused, Shiki heaved a small sigh.

“Did you check the internet during your trip?”

“No? I finally got to go on a trip with just Celty, so I forgot all those material things and just let loose.”

‘At most I searched for information on tour spots.’

Shiki nodded as he acknowledged their answers..

“Then it’s probably better that you find out about the situation yourselves, instead of me explaining.”

‘?’

“Once you’ve gone back to your apartment and settled after a meal, try searching up ‘Headless Rider’ on the net. Filter for the recent results.”

Then Shiki shrugged his shoulders, and turned his back on the both of them.

“I suppose we won’t be able to discuss this calmly today, so I’ll come again tomorrow. I’ll call, so please don’t refer me to voicemail then, Kishitani-sensei.”

After delivering the warning to Shinra, who had apparently been rejecting all work-related calls, he left the underground carpark

Watching Shiki’s back as he left, the two of them tilted their head and body respectively in confusion.

And 30 minutes later—

When they returned to their home on the top floor, Celty’s screams upon looking herself up on the internet echoed on her smartphone.

‘Uwaaaaaahh, we’re done for~, done for~!’

As Celty typed this over and over,

“Celty calm down! It’s all right, it’ll go fine, it’ll go just fine!”

‘Go fine where to?!’

“If I’m with Celty, I can brave fire and water and even blackholes!”

‘I don’t want to go there!’

Even as she retorted, Celty rolled around, both hands quashed on the sides of her helmet.

Serial disappearances had occurred in Ikebukuro, and the rumour that the Headless Rider was responsible was being spread like it was truth.

News along the lines of, ‘The Headless Rider’s behind the kidnappings?!’ had been written on Ikebukuro news sites, only to be picked up by other news sites beyond Ikebukuro, going national.

—‘Calling out that criminal Headless Rider’

—‘The Headless Rider’s a trash kidnapper’

—‘A Headless Rider in this day and age? lol’

With participants both anonymous and using their real names, such threads had sprung up on various message boards and social media sites; and on a well-known Q&A site,

—'My daughter's interested in the Headless Rider, do I have to kill her before she stops?'

and other similar questions had been submitted, receiving floods of responses.

'Uaaaa, this is horrible. I'm fine myself, but when I think about how it might cause you trouble since you're living with me Shinra ahhh'

"Well... I think we should be more worried about how you've actually worked for the Awakusu-kai before instead of the rumours, as our address hasn't even been leaked?"

'No, there's no way it'll end just like that! They'll surely narrow down my identity and contact the school and I'll be expelled and the police will come and ask for compensation uuaaah'

"Celty you don't even go to school, do you?! It's the first time I've seen you so agitated!"

Shinra sighed, but when he spoke he was smiling.

"You're really a netizen, Celty."

'It's not funny! I'm innocent! I'm completely innocent~!'

"Ah, but the thread in this Ikebukuro community about 'Calling out the Headless Rider's traffic offences' is all truth, so we can't complain there."

'Er... B, but Shooter's a horse, not a motorcycle...'

Celty averted her gaze from Shinra as she typed.

'B, but I haven't kidnapped anyone, really, believe me!'

"It's all right, Celty, believe in me!"

'Shinra...'

"Celty, even if you were a kidnapper, no, a serial killer, I'll still love you!"

As Shinra nodded vigorously Celty extended a stretch of shadow to grab his collar, knocking him onto the floor and shaking him hard.

'Stop me before you get to love me like that! N, no, I didn't do it! I didn't do it! Believe me, Shinra!'

"N, no, it's not a matter of believing, haven't we been together all along the past six months?"

Shinra replied calmly even as he was shaken, and Celty started.

'R, right! I was with you, Shinra! I have an alibi! If anything, they can get witnesses from the people at the hotels we were at...'

"Well... Even if an alibi could prove your innocence, where would you publish it? That's the problem."

'Ah.'

"If you put it online, it'd probably make things worse. The Headless Rider's online appearance? A fake? Self-promotion? Even if they believed it was really you, they'd only attack you further and say, 'There's no way I'd believe someone who breaks traffic laws'."

While Celty was panicking, Shinra pointed this out calmly.

"B, but why am I being treated as a criminal from the start... Do the people on this site have something against me?"

"Listen, Celty. Some aggregate news sites that spread rumours only aim to get more viewership so they can earn money from advertisements. It doesn't matter to them if the information's true or false. That's why they hype up even useless articles with sensational titles."

'Oh... Then, will the articles disappear once people know they're not true?'

“Even if people realise they’re fake and call it out, there’ll be people picking fights saying, ‘It’s true! Lock the thread!’ so even more people will check it out. Business will just get hotter and hotter. When things escalate and the admins post an apology people will go read it too, and the view counts will go up again. It’s not always that way, but... This ‘IkeNEW!’ site here’s been famous for being especially extreme, since more than six months ago.”

Shinra was looking at the notebook computer Celty had open.

Its screen displayed an information site called ‘IkeNEW!’.

‘IkeNEW!’ was a news site specialising in Ikebukuro’s news.

It was famous for spreading false information, but as it hyped things up with dramatic news titles, people who only read the titles and not the actual articles spread them on social media, starting a vicious cycle of lies.

Although it was said that most myths in Ikebukuro originated from this site, occasionally it would expose the truth before mass media, so its standing on the internet was complicated.

‘I, is that so?’

“Yep. There are also rumours that it collaborates with other sites to maximise profits. Well, it’s one of the most criticised Ikebukuro news sites around. But people who believe it believe everything. There are also people who’ve believed sites that said this site’s nothing but lies, and spread that, too.”

‘T, that’s just...’

“...Well, in your case, Celty, it’s true that you’ve broke traffic laws and been chased by the traffic police, so a lot of people seem to believe you would kidnap people.”

‘W, what should I...’

Placing a hand on her shoulder, Shinra proposed a solution.

“Well, if there’s indisputable evidence of your innocence... If the truth was made public in a sensational way, the misunderstanding might clear up.”

‘? What exactly should I do?’

“Simple. Just catch the actual criminal and make it go big on the news.”

‘I, I see.’

Celty seemed to have finally regained her composure. Shinra smiled at her reassuringly, and continued.

“And if they say it’s the Headless Rider who caught the criminal... that would be the most ideal.”



Takadanobaba. An apartment building.

“I see~, so~, the Headless Rider’s back...?”

Kotonami Kuon murmured this, on the roof of the building his apartment was in.

He held a smartphone in his hand, and on its screen was an *IkeNEW!* article titled, ‘First sighting of the Headless Rider in six months! A development in the missing persons case?!’

After seeing that information, Kuon had gazed into the night for some time –

Only to start snickering, snickering, without restraint.

“Goodness, what timing... It’s going to get wild, it’s really going to get wild.”

The focus of his gaze was the Sunshine Building.

He gazed at the lights of the tower rising into the sky, and murmured.

“But really... with so many interesting situations in place, it’s a wonder how most of these people haven’t noticed a thing.”

His smile vanished suddenly, and gripping his phone even tighter, he continued.

“Tedious, the lot of them. Most of the people in the city don’t produce a response I haven’t predicted. It’ll take just a bit more till they give something unexpected.”

Growing irritated, he narrowed his eyes.

“Let’s hope the Headless Rider... isn’t another tedious one.”

At this point, he looked at his phone again.

In the comments section of the news site people were all exclaiming over the Headless Rider’s return, cheering or arguing over it.

“Honestly, they’re all normal reactions. It’s the same as always.”

Sighing softly, Kuon’s eyes filled with cold repulsion, and he spat out into the night:

“This is why... I hate humans.”

With a cold expression he would never show in school, he added, quietly,

“I can’t believe there would be an informant of all people claiming to love humans.”

間接章



Connecting Chapter

The Outcast

The next day. Raira Academy.

Seeing Yahiro swollen-faced when he reached school, Himeka inched closer.

“What happened to your face...?”

Himeka asked this expressionlessly. Yahiro, through a large bandage, rubbed at the wound on his face as he replied.

“Ah, I just fell from the stairs.”

“Are you all right?”

She showed little expression, but it seemed she was in fact worried.

“My bones were fine and all, so yeah.”

“...You didn’t... happen to get into anything dangerous looking for the Headless Rider, right?”

“Ah, no, that’s definitely not the case.”

He was not lying.

It was not completely unrelated to the search for the Headless Rider, but that had certainly not been the cause of the incident.

“All right... Do take care.”

“Yeah, thanks.” “?”

Himeka was confused by how upbeat Yahiro was, but most likely she was not inclined to push the issue; she did not ask further about the injury on his face.

“... ”

“... ”

A strange atmosphere came on between them, and for a while both were speechless.

Destroying this atmosphere was Kuon as he reached the classroom.

“Mo~rning! Doing well?”

The green-haired boy said this with a bright smile, and without waiting for a reply, he pushed the conversation onward by himself.

“Hey, did you hear? Looks like the Headless Rider came back to the city last night, you know?”

“!”

“...!”

“Oh, no, it’s not that I looked into the Headless Rider by myself, yeah? Just, it was reported on some information sites; right now it’s a rumour you can find even on Twitia.”

Kuon justified himself pre-emptively—but Himeka did not chide him, and only wore a complicated expression. Feeling obliged to change the pace,

Yahiro attempted to shift the conversation away from the Headless Rider.

“B, by the way, I wanted to get a TV or radio to put in my room. Is there anywhere nearby that sells cheap?”

“Aren’t you boarding? Your room doesn’t have that?”

"No... I say it's boarding, but really I'm just borrowing one room at a house..."

Here Himeka raised her head as if she had thought of something.

"If you're looking for that, there's Sonohara Hall, it's an antiques store near my place..."

"An antiques store?"

"It was always closed before, but last month it renovated and reopened. It seems the store was put up for sale but no one bought it over, so in the end it was started up again. I think in the storefront there was an old radio that might've been made of wood. But the other things on display were all unusual; old katanas and strange vases... The lady running the store graduated from this school, if I'm not wrong."

"Wow... TV aside, that sounds like an interesting store."

And Kuon replied:

"An alumnus? Well, well. Sounds like we can get to ask about the urban legends of the school and teachers' weak spots and other interesting things, right? It's a rare chance, why not the three of us try visiting today, together?"

"Don't be so pushy."

Yahiro, sighing, did not take up Kuon's offer, but Himeka said, expressionlessly:

"All right."

"Eh?"

"I do want to talk to both of you more about the Headless Rider, too, so..."

"Really? Then it's set!"

Kuon clapped his hands together, but Yahiro said, anxiously: "Ah, but I have some work with the library committee after school today..."

Even that aside, Yahiro was concerned about troubling Himeka, but—

"It's all right. I'll wait until you're done."

And with Himeka's prompt answer, eventually, the three of them settled on traveling together after school.



After school. Raira Academy, 8th floor. The library.

"But is it really okay...? Though it should be fine if it's not a bother..."

Yahiro mumbled as he arranged the newly-arrived books, and a senior called him:

"He~y, Mizuchi-kun."

"Yeah?"

The boy turned, thinking there could be a new task for him, and the senior pointed to the librarian's room and said:

"The library committee president is calling you. He wants to talk or something."



30 minutes later. The school entrance.

"I'm so sorry, I'm late."

By the time Yahiro came running, Kuon and Himeka were both already waiting, having changed their shoes.

"Yo, was there trouble? Or just a lot to do?"

Kuon did not appear to be particularly angry, and asked this lightly.

"Ah, the work was fun, but I got called out by the library committee president."

"The president?"

Yahiro nodded slightly to Himeka.

"Yeah... We talked a bit. He gave me his email address and all."

"Oh? So... Is he choosing the next president?"

"No way. It's only my second day in the committee."

Yahiro changed his shoes as he said this, and Himeka said:

"But honestly, the library committee president, he looks really mature, doesn't he. He has something of a philosophical air all the time."

"Yeah. He really does have the feel of a committee president."

Yahiro nodded enthusiastically, and Kuon said, lightly:

"Ah, that committee president—he's almost an adult already, you know."

"Eh?"

"?"

Yahiro and Himeka appeared puzzled, and Kuon answered, innocuously.

"Apparently he got badly injured and was hospitalised for many months or something—he's a retaineer."



Raira Academy, 8th floor. The library.

"Ryugamine-senpai, where should I put these? They're reports from library committee members."

The young man so referred to by his junior turned, while replying evenly:

"Oh, I'll move that to the librarian's room. Good work."

"You too!"

The junior said this, and seeing that they had stood and left, the library committee president—Ryugamine Mikado—looked down to the school's main gate from the window.

The figure of the boy with which he had had a certain conversation could be seen, with a girl and boy that looked to be his friends, heading for the city.

As he saw their silhouettes, a memory awoke in Mikado.

A memory of himself from three years ago, walking the streets exactly like that, with another boy and girl.

In the past, the young man had made his way through the whole of Ikebukuro.

He had been pulled into all sorts of events, occasionally starting some of his own, had even been submersed in the extraordinary of the city.

“Mizuchi Yahiro-kun... huh.”

With that experience, Mikado had laid hands on various pieces of information faster than most in the city.

“To be able to fight head-on with Heiwajima-san, amazing.”

The boy who had fought with Heiwajima Shizuo, who had said he came to Ikebukuro to see the Headless Rider. And the serial disappearances in the city, and the return of the Headless Rider.

He had returned to the ordinary, only: information like this reached his ears faster than most.

However, he had only given the underclassman advice, and made no attempt to involve himself with the legend in the making.

Because he understood that he, himself, was already an outcast from the extraordinary of the city.

As the face of his lover, who had already graduated, and that of his close friend, who had pulled out of high school and started work, came to his mind—he turned his gaze, once more, to the underclassmen that were seeking to entangle themselves with the Headless Rider.

As he smiled at their backs as they passed the school gates—Mikado murmured, softly.

“Welcome to Ikebukuro. I... wish you the best.”

And so the city of Ikebukuro began to writhe once more.

Currents new and old swirled together, to call forth a new wind between them.

And still, as to what would be born after the wind had passed, even the city itself knew nothing.

Afterword

And with that, Durarara!!'s new series Durarara!!SH has begun!

This volume and the next will be a two-part installation, but after that I believe that unlike Durarara!! the volumes will essentially be self-contained, perhaps a series of associated works. It would be my pleasure if the Durarara!! world, with all of its various types of events, although now slightly different, brings enjoyment.

All three new students are eccentric, but being successors to the Durarara!! characters, just as how readers have loved and hated the characters up till now, it was with many frustrations, and some fun at times, that they were written.

Mizuchi Yahiro, Tatsugami Himeka, Kotonami Kuon. The names of these three have certain origins, but that will be addressed in other afterwords later on (though those living in the North and especially around Akita may have already realised instantly).

Whether this new work will be the superfluous addition to Durarara!! or whether it will become the snake's hands and evolve it to a dragon will be left to everyone, as readers, to judge, I think. As I will work my best to make it the latter, please continue your support from now on as well...!

※The author's intent was to have SH be an abbreviation of Snake Hands, but I feel it would be great if it could be interpreted otherwise, like Super Hard or Sonohara-san's H!, et cetera. Please embrace various SH's of your own!

Now... through the book jacket and other sources it should be known already by the time I say this, I think, but... production of the new Durarara!! anime has been confirmed!!

Yes... I won't specify exactly how many years, but plans for this were already in the workings a few years ago. But gathering the same line-up of the excellent staff and cast of the original took some time... At any rate, for being able to present a new Durarara!! anime with the former director and scriptwriter, production company, and cast exactly as they were, I am unendingly grateful.

It is thanks to everyone who supported the initial Dura anime that we can announce a new anime now. To those who remained fans of Durarara!! even as the times changed, and those who read the novels and asked, persistently, "When's Dura season two?" – I apologise for being unable to answer up till now. And thank you so much!

I do not know how much I can reveal exactly and am extremely uncertain, but what stands certain is that it's amazing...! I will do my best to give what I can, so, for Durarara!!SH as well, please give your support!

It was not mentioned in Volume 13 of Durarara!!, but these are the reasons why not Vamp! nor Baccano! will be produced but Durarara!! consecutively; and other than this other plans are in place for Durarara!!'s 10th anniversary. There has been a collaboration with Morinaga's famous Dars, the challenge of Niconico Novels, the adaption of the game for Playstation Vita, and more plans as well that I cannot say here – there will be many new forms of Durarara!! to be revealed, so Durarara!! fans, please look forward to it!

In addition, it seems that this year will be a year of change for me as well.

I do not know if it will be serialising yet when this book is published, but I will be tackling a serialisation in the weekly youth magazine of another company. It has been hectic working in a medium that operates on a completely different

logic from novels, but I will do my best to learn from now on. If the serialisation has started when this book is published, it would be my pleasure if you were to pick it up, read it and enjoy it, and support it alongside Dengeki Bunko's novels!

There are other uncertainties, but I would like to work hard on Dengeki's novels with Durarara!! at the forefront. Conversely these activities make writing novels exciting, and I feel as if my writing speed has increased as well. Though that could just be me...

Last but not least, acknowledgments.

Sincere apologies to those at AMV's printing department, especially the in-charge Papio-san, for rushing the drafts for the new series late...

For the new anime finally in the works, and the three comicalisations. To the anime staff, manga artists, and editors, everyone who has created and expanded the Durarara!! universe in various media.

Everyone who has looked out for me – family, friends, writers as well as illustrators.

Yasuda Suzuhito-san, for the amazing illustrations amidst his busyness with various work. I look forward to reading the Yozakura Quartet BD/DVD special collaboration manga with Durarara!! every time!

And most of all, to everyone who has picked up this new story, Durarara!!SH.

Thank you very much! I'll be counting on everyone from now on as well!

March 2014

Ryohgo Narita



三頭池八尋

琴南久音

辰神姫香

黒沼青葉

折原九瑠璃

折原舞流

栗楠茜

写楽美影

渡草二郎

渡草三郎

平和島静雄

セルティ・ストウルツソン

岸谷新羅

竜ヶ峰帝人

TO BE CONTINUED DURARARA!!SHx2
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